warm where the blood pools

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warm where the blood pools

by certifiedclown, searchandrescue

Summary

After being framed for a series of murders he didn't commit, Will turns to the only person he knows he can rely on: his father.

will is typing.....

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

daddy CALL

xxx-xxx-xxxx more options

---

what kinda animals get stuck in chimneys

Raccoons and possums.

Squirrels, sometimes.

You got something in your chimney, boy?

i thought so yeah

broke through the wall

there's nothing there

You probably scared whatever it was off.

yeah

It's probably fine.

Don't worry bout it.

okay

---

i heard another animal today

i thought it was in the road

sounded like it was hit

daddy there was nothing there

i'm hearing things now

Are you sure?

yeah

It could've been from further off. You've always had better hearing than most.

okay

If it's bothering you, talk to your psychiatrist friend. See what he's got to say bout it.

okay i will

Don't be afraid to call if you need me, you hear me?

Hell, call me even if you don't.

i will

---

i lost time today

i was at the beach and then i blinked and i was waiting at dr lecter's office

what's happening to me?

You think it might be stress? Those crime scenes of yours always did shake you.

that's what dr lecter said yeah

Well, he's a professional. He knows what he's talking about.

i don't wanna be crazy

this can't be mental

it has to be physical

Like a tumor? Blood clot or something?

it has to be

It has to be

I hope it ain't. Tumors are bad news, son.

rather it be a tumor

than you know mental illness

Call a neurologist then, schedule an appointment.

i'll ask dr lecter

he used to be a surgeon

he probably knows someone

If he doesn't, that Bloom girl might.

he will

he's going to help me

he promised

Okay.

Be careful.

Lemme know if anything turns up.

i will

---

nothing

they’re gonna run more tests but they’re not sure they’ll find anything

hope they do it’s getting worse

contaminated a crime scene

Are you sure you should keep working?

This is bad for you, it always has been.

Maybe you should take a break.

Give your old man some peace of mind.

i can't

i'm saving lives

But what about your life, son?

Don't it matter?

you sound like hannibal

So it's Hannibal now, huh? Sounds like you two're getting cozy.

He's got the right idea. You matter too, Will.

he's my friend

i can't quit

this is what i'm good at

You're good at other things. Just think about?

Please.

i'll think about it

I love you, boy. Take care of yourself.

i love you too

i'll try

Will? You've gone quiet.

Is something going on?

Call me.

Will.

---

i'm scared

Are you okay? What's going on?

Call me and let me know what's going on.

Will? Are you there?

Call me.

Son, please.

Chapter End Notes

if you feel the need to scream you can find certifiedclown at willgrahampussypower and searchandrescue at seveneyesoup

first impressions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Beau Graham knew something was wrong as soon as he heard his phone ringing. *Incoming call-- Unknown Number, Baltimore, Maryland* .

"Hello? How can I-"

"Daddy? It's me. Listen, I---I need you to come down here. I was framed for several murders and I didn't do it. No one else believes me, but I didn't---I didn't kill those people, Daddy." Through the phone, Beau could hear Will draw a shaky breath, like he wasn't sure Beau would take him at his word.

"I believe you. I'm takin' the first flight available tomorrow and I'll take tonight to pack, unless you need me up there now. Just say the word, boy, and I'll be there."

"No, come tomorrow. It's nothing urgent, I know I didn't do it, despite all the evidence to the contrary, and I know the other evidence, the real evidence, is going to let me out and the real killer, the person who did this to me, will be here instead."

"What do you need from me, Will? I can't find you evidence."

"I'm not asking you to. All I'm asking you to do is to be around until it turns up. And," Will let out a sigh. *"And I want you to watch the dogs. Alana has them, she'll tell you---you don't know who that is. Once you get there, call Jack Crawford. He'll explain everything, except that I'm innocent, and he'll be the one who'll let you see me. They don't exactly allow walk-ins at the---Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane."*

"Watch the dogs, talk t'Jack Crawford, he's FBI?"

“Yeah, he doesn’t believe me, act like you’re not sure just what to think yet. Things’ll be easier that way.”

“Got it. Anythin' else?”

“Just an ‘I love you’.”

“I love you too, son. See ya soon.”

Jack Crawford heard a knock on his office door and looked through it at the man he assumed to be Will’s father. He was around Will’s height, stocky, and looked to be in his sixties. He had greying dark hair with tight curls, and the way he stood reminded Jack of Will, that same quiet waiting. *Best not to keep him waiting too long*, Jack thought, and opened the door.

“Mr. Graham?”

“Jack Crawford? Nice to meet you, sir.” Will’s father offered a handshake, and Jack accepted. His hand was warm and a little damp. He was anxious. Any father would be, hearing his son had been accused of murder. “Name’s Beau Graham, I’m here ‘bout my son, Will? He said you’d tell me everythin’.”

“Um, yes. Why don’t you have a seat? I’m sure this is a lot to take in.” Jack gestured at the chairs facing his desk.

“Yessir, it---certainly is.” He held his coat over the back of the other chair, as if to set it down. “Ya mind if I---?”

“No, not at all.” Jack sat down at his desk and Beau draped his coat, an unusually heavy one for the mild weather recently, over the chair and sat in the one next to it. The dress shirt he

wore underneath it was barely wrinkled, clearly put on just before coming here. *Quite the contrast to Will* , Jack thought, as he considered where to begin. It seemed best to be direct.

"Mr. Graham, your son---Will, killed four people." Jack looked at Beau Graham, who seemed remarkably calm. Not calm, perhaps steady was a better word.

"I know. He says he didn't do it." Beau seemed to be asking and telling in equal parts.

"He doesn't---Mr. Graham, Will doesn't remember killing those people. He's sick, and he wasn't himself when he did it, but the evidence is clear. Will killed them."

Beau's face twisted at that, as if he was suffering through some great pain or torment. *He is,* Jack thought sympathetically. *He's just lost his son.* He leaned forward in his seat, resting his elbows on his desk, steepling his fingers together as he regarded the grieving man. Now that he'd taken a good look he could see that stress was clinging to the man like a second skin. It was in the pinched lines on his forehead and eyes, and the worried frown on his lips. He looked like a man on death row - steady, yes, but mournful all the same.

"I know it's hard to accept," Jack began, softening his voice as though that could make the words hurt any less. He knew it wouldn't. "Will was---*is* my friend, and I don't want to believe that he was capable of this, but the evidence is...compelling, to say the least. We can't hide from this."

Beau slumped in his chair, rubbing at his eyes tiredly in a movement that was so entirely reminiscent of Will that Jack almost thought he was seeing double for a moment. "Damn," Will's father cursed, laughing sadly under his breath. "I was hopin' it wudn't true."

"Me too," Jack sighed, rising from his seat to cross over to the wounded man. He rested a hand on his shoulder, and squeezed, seeing him out of the room with as much comfort as he could offer. He knew it was empty, but it was all he could do. "Me too."

He ignored the lingering looks from his subordinates, praying they'd keep their mouth shut until the man was out of the room. Thankfully, his prayers paid off, but when he returned he was assaulted with three wide-eyed stares. Jimmy was the first to break the silence.

"*That's* Will's dad?" he asked in a loud whisper, mouth opening and closing as if he had more to add before he gave up with an intelligible grunt.

"Yeah," Jack agreed wryly. "Think we can get a DNA test?"

Frederick Chilton, Beau quickly learned, was an interesting character. A smarmy man parading his "achievements" around like a peacock. Beau instantly decided he didn't like him, and that he probably never would. Why on earth would they let a man like that run a hospital for the mentally insane? Beau was more than a little upset that this was the man in charge of his son's mental and physical well-being while they waited for the trial. *And after it, if that man has his way*, Beau thought, doing all he could not to glare at the man responsible for his son.

"I wonder what neuroses you hide away in that mind of yours, Mr. Graham," the man said with a slick smirk as Beau walked away with his visitor's pass. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, as they say."

As he walked away, he almost bumped into another man dressed in a very expensive looking suit. *Damn all these rick folk,* he thought, agitated, as he offered up an absentminded apology to the man. Then he looked at him - really looked.

He was tall, with broad shoulders, but his suit made him seem smaller, softer than he really was, almost like it was a purposeful guise to make others feel at ease. His face was an aristocrat's, with high cheekbones, deep set eyes, and firm lips. A face carved out of marble, a Greek statue come to life. But his eyes. Something in them screamed predator, other - he seemed distinctly not entirely human. Maybe it was the reflected pinpoints of red in his eyes, maybe it was that glimpse of small, crooked teeth carefully hidden behind parted lips, or maybe it was his dark, slicked-back hair with a gentle widow's peak.

"The South is most commonly known for their hospitality," the man spoke softly, his voice a quiet whisper that seemed to almost echo in the small, dark lobby of the hospital. Beau somehow knew he was speaking at a normal volume, but it didn't sound like it. "I am sorry to say Frederick lacks that hospitality."

“Ah,” Beau said intelligently, careful to keep his voice level. “So you’re my boy’s shrink friend.”

Hannibal blinked at that, the movement oddly careful, somewhere between offended, amused, and assessing. “I am,” he allowed, extending a hand. “Hannibal Lecter. A pleasure to finally meet you, Mr. Graham, though I wish it were under brighter circumstances.”

Beau took his hand and shook it once in a firm grip. “Beau Graham, pleasure’s mine. Will’s told me all ‘bout you. He really cares ‘bout you, you know.”

Hannibal almost winced at that, as if that statement wounded him. He looked away, to the right of Beau’s head, eyes going distant. Beau didn’t know if he could trust that reaction as genuine or not - something about this well-dressed man rubbed him the wrong way, against the fur. He wondered what Will saw in him to make him trust the man so implicitly. It seemed foolish, but he trusted Will to be a good judge of character.

“I confess I do not know how to feel about that,” Hannibal said after a moment, meeting his eyes once more with thin lips, a pinched look to his eyes. It didn’t look entirely genuine. “On some level, I am happy that he considers me worth telling you about, but I cannot help but feel like I let him down. It almost stings to know that he had such faith in me, and yet I was not able to help him.”

“Makes sense,” Beau grunted, fiddling with the pass clipped to his dress shirt. “I think we’re all a little confused right now. ‘Specially Will.”

“Yes, I imagine so,” it was said softly, the same tone he used before - considering, probing, assessing. He resisted the urge to squirm underneath those dark eyes. “It will be hard for Will to accept that he’s done such horrible things, but in the end he doesn’t have a choice. He needs to overcome this confusion to heal. We all do.”

He said it with such confidence. The evidence against Will was strong. He had heard some details from Dr. Chilton, who relayed them almost gleefully, and if Dr. Lecter agreed? After all, he was the only person who would know if Will was truly capable of those things. *Except for Will*, Beau reminded himself. But if Will hadn’t been himself when he did it, what then?

Beau knew that there was a seed of doubt somewhere in his mind, and while he was determined not to water it, he knew the soil where it lay was already rich and fertile as the farmlands he grew up on. He wasn't sure, not anymore. But damned if he would let Will know that.

Beau opened his mouth - to do what? He didn't know, but in that moment he felt such anger - but before he could speak, an orderly interrupted. "Mr. Graham?" he asked politely, sparing Hannibal only a cursory glance. "If you'll follow me, please?"

"I, um," Beau hesitated, looking to Hannibal for a brief moment before he nodded. "Yeah, okay, lead the way."

The orderly spun on his heel and began walking away, leaving Beau to give Hannibal a hasty goodbye as he rushed to follow the man. Hannibal simply smiled - an odd twitch of his lips that didn't quite fit on his elegant features, as if it was borrowed from someone else. *Copied and pasted,* Beau thought to himself, dryly, trying almost desperately to ignore that damning seed of doubt and the rapidly growing swell of worry as he was led through the hospital.

Dark corridors bathed in darker shadows greeted his weary eyes with something like somber dread. The hospital suddenly felt like the prison it really was. A cage for those deemed too unstable or dangerous to be let loose on polite society. He couldn't believe his son was one of those people. His boy, who when faced with a run over cat or dog used to cry himself hoarse, and then insist on burying it himself. His little boy, whose first time fishing became an entire ordeal after he asked, in a plaintive tone, why man needed to kill to live, abruptly understanding what it meant to eat the fish his daddy caught.

He couldn't imagine Will ever doing something like what that Jack Crawford told him, or this Hannibal Lecter. They had to be wrong. Will was too soft-hearted, too kind, too good. It would kill him to unleash that kind of violence on the world. *Unless he thought they were deservin',* Beau thought, a sardonic smile twitching at his lips as he remembered the righteous rage contained in Will's gentle hands.

It was still a hard pill to swallow - too large in his hand, foul and rotting against his skin. He didn't want to entertain the thought. He didn't want Will to suffer through this. He wanted his son out of the hospital, at home with his dogs, happy and safe. He wanted to shield Will from all of this, hold him tight and never let go. That was his son, his little boy, and they were accusing him of murder.

It made Beau feel sick. And if his hands shook at his sides with barely contained rage - well, that's between two gentle souls who burned with fire at the unjust.

The orderly stopped suddenly, turning to leave after cocking his head to the cell to the left of them. Beau realized that he had walked through the hospital and passed through the gate. He sighed, steeling himself against the ugly cocktail of worry, grief, and anger mixing in his chest, and stepped forward into the light to stand in front of Will's small, desolate cell.

As if sensing his presence, Will's tense shoulders relaxed, and he turned with the same small smile on his face that he had when he brought yet another skinny dog home - recognizing family. Right then, at that very moment, the reality of what was happening finally sunk in - really sunk in. As he looked at his child, dressed in drab grey, serial number stitched on his shirt, eyes dark with turmoil, he suddenly realized Will wouldn't survive being locked in a cage. He'd have to get him out.

"Hey, Daddy."

"Hey yourself, son."

Chapter End Notes

if you feel the need to scream you can find certifiedclown at willgrahampussypower and searchandrescue at seveneyesoup

family reunion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sitting in his cell, Will Graham heard the hall door open. There were two sets of footsteps, one the soft rubber soles of the shoes the orderlies wore, and the other the heavy, solid sound of a pair of work boots. *He's here*, Will thought. He wanted to be excited, it's what a family reunion deserves, but more than anything he felt relief. Safety. Security. This whole thing really might turn out alright. The orderly, he was pretty sure this one was named Matthew, gave the same droning speech they gave all new visitors, and the footsteps stopped. Will turned around with as much of a smile as he could muster, and greeted his father.

"Hey, Daddy."

"Hey yourself, son."

"It's good to see you."

"And you, but I wish it wudn't like this." Beau took a cautious step forward. "How---how close am I allowed to stand?"

"There's a line," Will said, gesturing at the concrete floor. Beau stood as close as he could and rubbed his neck, looking at Will apologetically. "Allegedly," Will continued with a grimace, "It's there to keep anyone from getting hurt. In reality, it makes sure we speak loudly enough that Dr. Chilton can hear our every word. I assume you've met him?"

"Yeah. He's quite the character. Don't wanna say too much 'bout him to his face. 'Spose I should say hello?"

"I wouldn't. He doesn't deserve the courtesy. He certainly doesn't provide any to his patients. He's going to want to talk to you, you know that? He's going to claim it's to better---understand me, for my therapy. He isn't my psychiatrist. Dr Lecter is." Will looked defiantly at no one in particular and hoped Chilton was watching. He probably was. He was dying for

any scrap of information he could get. *I'm his golden ticket*, Will thought, and his heart sunk as he thought of Abigail. He was going to stand trial for her murder in two days, and he couldn't tell anyone who her real killer was. Not if he wanted to ever stand a chance at getting out of this place.

"Funny you should mention the good doctor, he said the same thing. I ran into him after I got my pass."

"You met Hannibal? What did he say?"

"That Dr. Chilton don't have any manners. Almost like he was apologizin', but it wudn't his fault."

"I have a therapy session with him in about ten minutes, so they'll be here to chain me up and drag me over there soon. Remember what I said to you on the phone? I need you to take the dogs. I've talked to Alana Bloom, she's taking care of them now, she's going to meet you at the house this afternoon. There's seven of them, and she'll introduce you. That's what I need from you, to watch the dogs and to be around. It feels good knowing there's someone here on my side." Will walked to the bars of his cell and leaned forward on them, clasping his hands outside the cell and making the orderly take a step forward. "And Daddy? I love you." Will looked up at Beau, this time with a smile he didn't have to force.

"I love you too, son." Beau walked over the white line and put his hand on Will's, and the orderly interjected, leading him away and back down the dark hall. Will watched as they walked away. He knew the gesture was more than fatherly love, just like Beau knew his comment about Dr. Chilton was more than an annoyed aside. When he put his hand on his, he had said just what Will was hoping he would---*I'm willing to break the rules for you* .

As Beau Graham was being escorted away from his son's cell, he thought about Will's last comment. *It feels good knowing there's someone here on my side*. He was glad to be a comfort to his son, but hearing that from Will agitated the gnawing doubt he was doing his best to ignore. At any rate, he hoped Will was wrong. Dr. Lecter ought to be on his side, at any rate, though Will probably defined "his side" as people willing to believe in his innocence.

He was on Will's side, despite Hannibal Lecter's insidious words and the festering doubt they inspired, and he'd stay on Will's side. Beau didn't want him in this hospital; he wanted him at home with his dogs, planning a fishing trip for the weekend, and he'd do anything to make that happen. It was an easy decision to make. For better or for worse, he wasn't going to abandon his son.

As Beau walked back through the halls of the dreary institution, he noticed that it became more polished the further they got from the cells. Marble and granite for the visitors, concrete and tile for the prisoners. *Figures,* Beau thought, and felt the same bitter taste in his mouth he had felt so often today, which only grew stronger when he caught a glimpse of that Chilton man's dark grey suit. He sighed, gathering his composure, and walked forward, refusing to let his posture show how tense he made him. Predictably, the man approached him and Will was right to hate psychiatrists so much.

"A word, Mr. Graham?" he asked, drawing the words out lazily, with an open expression, as if he was completely certain Beau would comply. Beau wanted to sigh again, but he suppressed the urge.

"S'this 'bout Will?" he grunted, shifting his heavy jacket to his other arm to rub at his eyes. He was tired and dealing with this oily man only served to exacerbate his building headache.

Chilton inclined his head and smirked, full of an obviously unearned confidence. "He is the man of the hour."

"You ain't his shrink, are you?" Beau said bluntly, meeting Chilton's eyes with something akin to disappointment. "I ain't talkin' 'bout Will with you, sir."

"Mr. Graham," his expression fell into something more serious, "this is about his trial."

"Hell," Beau muttered under his breath, rubbing at his eyes again before gesturing vaguely. "Let's get on with it then."

Chilton smiled and spun on his heel, clearly expecting Beau to follow him. He fell in step behind him, tiredly observing the dull colors of the walls as they trekked to the man's office - Jupiter in his palace at the top of the heavens. *What would that make Will?* Beau thought, grimacing. He didn't have an answer.

Beau found himself in an office which he thought far too grand for a man like Chilton, sitting in a chair across from his desk with his hands folded over the coat in his lap. Chilton sat back in his chair, looking at Beau expectantly. The feeling of being so closely observed made him feel like a lab rat, and in that moment he felt very sympathetic toward anyone who had to deal with this man on a regular basis, violent criminal or not.

"Earlier, I'm afraid I didn't get a chance to offer you my condolences," he began with another smile - this one was oddly secretive, as if he knew something Beau didn't. Beau didn't like that. "This must be a… troubling time for you."

"It was quite the shock, yeah," Beau agreed, allowing himself to relax in the very comfortable chair. He knew how to play this game.

"Surely you must have had some suspicions about his true nature," Chilton persisted, eyes focused on him. "Of course, you couldn't have predicted… this, but there must have been some signs." He faced Beau less directly as he said this, as if trying to get him to divulge an interpersonal secret at a social event, rather than implicate his own son in crimes he didn’t commit. Beau decided to match his tone.

"Can't say I did," he sighed, pretending to reminisce. "Will was always such a sweet kid - I never thought he'd do somethin' like this."

Chilton was undeterred, but his tone became more serious. "Do you think your son lied to you then?"

"No, sir," he replied. "Will don't often lie. He just likes to leave things out."

"Is it at all possible, Mr. Graham," the man leaned in, "that Will *left out* anything about his violent impulses?"

Beau frowned at him. "He ain't never had those impulses. My boy ain't violent."

"Mr. Graham," Chilton said, delicately, watching his expression closely before continuing in an almost patronizing tone, "do you know how far back such a thing would have to go? There would have been signs in early childhood."

"No, Will's always been soft-hearted," Beau denied, shaking his head. "He used to cry over roadkill and make me help 'im bury them, and leave flowers at the graves for weeks." He glanced away from him and smiled a little. If Dr. Chilton was as bad a psychiatrist as he seemed, it wouldn't matter that Beau wasn't an exceptional actor.

"What about his relationship with people?" Chilton smiled slowly, amused. "From what I've heard, he's quite… antisocial." He pronounced the word with great care. "Surely that was apparent-"

"Now hold on a damn second. I ain't here to talk 'bout Will with you," Beau interrupted, angry now. "I'm here 'bout his damn trial. Now are we gonna talk 'bout it or can I go?" He moved his coat as if to storm out, and Chilton looked alarmed for a moment before regaining his infuriatingly smug composure.

"They may ask you to take the stand, Mr. Graham, and they're not going to ask you if you think Will did it," Chilton said gravely, eying him warily. "They're going to ask if you think he knew what he was doing. You need to be ready."

Beau regarded him coldly and stood, staring down at the man with disdain before leaving. He had nothing left to say to him, and he wanted to leave this god-awful institution as quickly as possible. He had to meet Will's Alana Bloom, after all. He didn't want to be late.

By the time Beau reached Will's house, the sun was setting, and a low fog hung over the fields, illuminated by the last rays of sunlight. The small house looked like a boat on a calm lake, the second story a cabin, the roof the deck. Beau imagined Will sitting on the roof

looking out into the woods, or standing in the fields looking back at the house, comfortably distant from the person his home represented, or standing on the porch as his dogs cut trails through the snow and fog. *He ought to be here now*, Beau thought as he parked the rental car next to Will's.

He had told Alana Bloom he would be running a bit late, and he texted her to tell her he was there, and received an automatic text in response, saying she was driving. Beau sighed, put on his coat, and rummaged through his pockets for the house key he had been given. As he stood there, he saw movement on the porch---a large dog.

"Hey there! You one'a Will's?" The dog perked up, but didn't leave its post. As Beau walked onto the porch, the dog approached him. It was a large brown mottled mutt, and bore a striking resemblance to Will's first dog, Churchill. It looked healthy, and fed, clearly cared for, but Alana Bloom wasn't here yet. "You have to be, you look just like Church." He sat down in the chair by the door, and the dog sat by his legs, leaning on them, keeping them warm against the oncoming cold.

Before long, he saw a pair of headlights pull into the gravel driveway, and a dark-haired woman in a coat, scarf, and boots stepped out and waved at him.

"Hi. You must be Will's dad. I see you've already met Winston." She smiled at the dog on the porch and went to open a back door of her car to let out the other dogs.

"Said his name was Winston? Shoulda guessed." Beau ruffled Winston's ears and stood up. "Need a hand?"

"Yeah, if you could get Zoe out of the front seat. Why should you have guessed?"

"Looks just like Will's first dog, Churchill. Figures he'd name him after 'im." Beau picked up Zoe, a small dog with a prominent underbite. She squirmed to be put down. He set her down among the other dogs now running around. "Who might these be?"

Alana looked around at the dogs as if to make sure they were all there. "Big brown one is Harley, big white one is Jack, black one is Max, and the little ones are Ellie and Buster, and

then Zoe and Winston.” She pointed at each dog as she named them, and then at Beau with a sympathetic smile. “How are you feeling?”

“Cold,” Beau said, pulling his coat tighter around himself. “Quite the change from Florida. Come inside?”

“Sure.” Alana seemed to have been expecting a different answer. *Psychiatrists are used to people talking to them,* Beau thought somewhat bitterly, wondering why his son seemed so caged in by them, both literally and figuratively. It was odd and uncharacteristic of Will, and Beau didn't know what to think about it.

"I'll get a fire goin' here in a minute," he told her, holding the door open for her. She smiled at him, nodded her head in thanks, and stepped past him. Beau looked to the dogs milling around the yard and whistled, short and sharp, clicking his tongue twice when their heads turned towards the sound. He smiled fondly when they obediently came inside the house, and closed the door behind them.

"They listened to you," Alana observed quietly as he moved to the fireplace. There wasn't any wood, and now that he was looking at it he wasn't sure the chimney was cleared, so he turned on the heater set in front of it, deciding it would be enough for now. "They've only ever listened to Will."

"Boy's always trained 'em the same way," Beau said, hanging up his coat. He cocked his head toward the kitchen. "Ya want some coffee? I'm 'bout to make a pot."

"Yes, thank you," she said politely, following him into the reasonably sized kitchen area. It was pristine - almost clinically clean. He supposed that was the crime scene cleaners. Alana set a hand on the counter. "I'm sure you've been asked this a lot these past few days, but how are you doing? Really."

"M'fine," he grunted, measuring the grounds to put in the filter before sighing. He finished preparing the coffee and left it to brew, turning to face her with weary eyes. "It's….it's a lot, I'm not goin' to lie. And I don't know what to do."

"It is," Alana agreed, sitting at the table. She gave him a smile - one that was equal parts sad and kind. Beau could see now why Will liked her. "I won't pretend to understand how this is impacting you, but we all care about Will."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," he sighed, fingers drumming against the counter behind him. "You're a good lot. Good for Will. But this….this ain't right."

"No, it's not," her voice was soft but there was something like steel in it - a quiet strength. He could *really* see why Will liked her. "It shouldn't have happened at all. It shouldn't have gotten this far."

"What? Will workin' for that Jack Crawford?" Beau shook his head and laughed. It was a dry sound, mirthless. "Will ain't unstable. He knows what he can handle. You don't have to use kiddy gloves with 'im."

"I know," Alana turned her head away to look out of the windows. Beau knew she didn't. *None of them understand him,* he thought, his chest constricting painfully for his son. Still that same lonely little boy with no friends, always the new kid, always the freak. "But if Jack hadn't pushed him---"

"It ain't Jack's fault," Beau cut her off, turning to tend to the coffee. He pulled two mugs down, gave them a quick rinse, and poured the coffee. He handed one to her and cradled the other close to his chest, as if it would stave off the cold feeling cruelly tugging at his ribs. "Will was just sick, is all. Bad sick, sure, but that don't mean anyone's to blame. Don't go pointin' fingers. Will's a grown man and he can make his own decisions jus' fine."

In some abstract way, it angered him that people had always treated Will differently because of his empathy. It angered him in an entirely different way to learn that his friends did the same. *No wonder he feels like no one's on his side,* Beau thought incredulously. He sipped at his coffee and focused on the burn it left on his tongue. *They all treat him like a goddamn kid.*

"Okay," Alana said mildly, fingers turning white as she gripped her mug tightly. Beau knew she wanted a reason beyond the sickness to think Will wasn't responsible for what he did, but he couldn't give her one. He didn't want to encourage her way of thinking about Will. It wasn't productive, and would only hurt Will in the end. He couldn't abide by that.

"Do you know Will used to have this stuffed toy of his mama's? He used to keep it in this shoe box bed he made for it when he went to school," he smiled widely, recalling Will's gap toothed smile and tiny hands. "Named it Puppy. He wudn't too creative. Still ain't."

"Really?" she returned his smile, her grip on the mug relaxing. "It's strange to imagine Will as a kid. He always seems so...serious."

"That's what he wants you to think," Beau revealed, shoulder shaking with a barely there chuckle. "He was a wild kid. Soft-hearted, but real rowdy. Liked to climb trees and scare me half to death with it. Think it was his favorite activity - climbin' to high places to look down at everythin'."

"Far away from the rest of the world," Alana said, her voice melancholic. "That sounds more like him."

"Yeah," Beau drained the rest of his coffee, barely blinking as the scalding liquid traveled down his throat. He put it in the sink and stared at the green walls. "Used to think he was a fae child or somethin'. Too precious to be from me and his mama. Had to be a gift from a spirit."

Abruptly, his throat clogged up with something like hurt and he stopped talking, clearing his throat around the lump. It didn't work, and he breathed against the weight of it, tilting his head back with his eyes closed. Alana let him have his moment in silence, looking down into the coffee with a carefully neutral expression. Beau appreciated it, but he didn't feel like hosting her any longer.

"M'sorry," he said with some difficulty, voice cracking. He cleared his throat and tried again. "I'm not really feelin' like company right now. Uh, could you---?"

"Of course," she said quickly, flashing him another kind smile as she interrupted so he wouldn't have to ask. "It was nice meeting you."

"You too." He managed to see her out, standing by the door to wave as she drove off. As soon as her car was out of sight, he closed and locked the door, placing one hand over his eyes as he leaned against it. "Fuckin' hell."

That's my boy, he kept thinking over and over again - on repeat. He couldn't make the mantra stop now that it had started. All he could see was Will holding up his first fish, Will dragging home another stray, Will crying over broken lizard tails, Will laughing because Beau said some stupid adult thing again. It suddenly hurt so much, a parent's grief overwhelming all at once. *My boy,* he thought, *my little boy.*

It was all he could do not to cry.

“Hello, Will. It’s good to see you.”

“Wish I could say the same.” Will glared up at Hannibal. “You’ll have to---forgive me, if I can’t quite forget who put me here.” Will folded his hands in front of him on the table of the privacy room, creating a barrier between them.

Hannibal’s expression shifted to one of concern and pity. It made Will's teeth feel sore and fragile in his mouth, and he had the violent urge to bare them in a snarling smile, to let the heated air of the room sink into the bone and settle deep inside. “Whether you remember it or not, Will, it was your own actions that---”

“Don’t start. Don’t---don’t disrespect me like that. We both know what happened, what has been happening since the moment we met. Now are you going to tell me what you want from me, or leave me to figure it out on my own?” Will allowed some of the hostility he felt toward the man sitting across from him to slip through, enough to make it clear he was serious. Hannibal didn’t react. Will's fingers twitched.

“I respect you very much. You are endlessly fascinating to me, and your approach, though different than my own, is one I admire greatly.” He looked at Will as if he expected him to take it as a compliment instead of the flattery it had to be. He'd have to be disappointed. When Will didn't respond, he continued. “I was called to a crime scene today. I was there to

fill in for you, and when I was there, I tried to view it the way you would, see things the way you would see them. Death looks very different through your eyes.” Hannibal placed his hands on the table and leaned forward slightly, mirroring Will.

“And when you looked through my eyes," Will paused, tasting bile at the thought, "what is it you saw exactly?”

“I saw death. I saw the bodies of the victims, and the killer whose victims they were. I saw their lives and fears, and understood them in the context of their fate, and I saw the killer and his needs and beliefs, and understood them in the context of his work, as if through two intersecting panes of glass. Is that how you always see, Will?” Hannibal looked at him, dark eyes scanning his face. Will met his gaze and something in him ached at the sight. He suddenly wanted to look away, to remove himself from those eyes - or maybe he wanted to remove the eyes themselves.

That was a pleasant thought. *Unpleasant*. His fingers twitched again, and he knew without looking that Hannibal had seen it. His mouth felt too small, and his bones too big, this roiling coil of emotions too much to bear. An overfilled glass, splitting underneath the weight.

“No.” Will glanced around the room, and continued with a contempt he knew would be read as envy. He couldn't bring himself to care. Hannibal already knew so much about him. “I don’t have the---luxury of a barrier.”

“Jack Crawford and the FBI no longer have the luxury of you because of that," Hannibal paused and Will risked a look. His eyes were still that strange maroon, still rich with that dangerous beauty that Will hadn't seen before. He could see now. It was too late. "It is your lack of barriers that landed you here.”

“It’s not my lack of barriers that put me here," he hissed, ripping his hands away from the desk to rub at his eyes - to hide from Hannibal's - which took away the barrier between them. *Isn't that funny?* Will could feel the laugh bubbling up to his ribs. He snapped his teeth around it, swallowing it down, and ignoring the burn and bitterness that came with it. "The barriers crossed weren’t on my end, and they were a very---different kind.”

"Were they?" Hannibal asked softly. Will closed his eyes behind his hands, refusing the tears burning at their corners, and breathed. He could hear the shift of fabric as Hannibal crossed

his legs. "Your friends at the FBI miss you very much, Will. You have left a hole in their lives, a void. It is a shame that you are here, unable to fill it."

"I shouldn't be!" Will snapped, grinding his teeth painfully. He wondered if Hannibal could hear his molars scraping together. "You *know* that and don't say you don't. Don't---don't lie to me."

"I have never lied to you, Will," Hannibal said after a moment. Will let his hands fall to the table, curling them into fists. He breathed and forced himself to meet Hannibal's eyes once more. "I told you I would help you. And I will."

There was something meaningful in the way he said it, as if he knew Will would pick up on it. And Will did, like a loyal dog, and he hated how he could read this man so well, so that it felt like a second nature. It was something involuntary, like breathing, or maybe something like his heart that he couldn't stop if he tried. It disgusted him, and he absorbed the realization that even here, Hannibal surrounded him, pressed in at every corner. It was down to Will's very bones - he had spent months carving his name deeper and deeper until he struck marrow, and he had poisoned it all.

Will looked at Hannibal's eyes again, admired the color, and *ached.*

"Okay," he said. He had no choice but to trust him.

It was the morning of the trial. Will was given a suit to wear in place of his grey-green jumpsuit. It should have made him feel more human, restored his dignity. It did not. He felt like a dog being prepared for a show, groomed to be judged by others with no say in the matter. No, not a dog. A pig. A show pig, brushed and washed and paraded around the fairground, whose slaughter was a celebration for everyone but the pig. *At least those judges know what they're looking at*, he thought grimly.

His fate was in the hands of people who did not know and couldn't hope to understand him, he was going to be spoken for and beseeched on behalf of and pleaded on account of by

people with their own agendas unknowingly serving a loftier agenda. *A higher purpose*, Will thought, sickened at the idea.

Hannibal was there, in the courtroom. He was all Will could focus on.

As the evidence against him piled up before the jury, his mind was on Hannibal. He was behind him, across the aisle, and Will could feel him. As the prosecution spun tales of fresh horrors and attributed them to him, he wondered if Hannibal had chosen a special brutality for the murders or if he had been holding back. If that was holding back - his stomach churned, and he set his teeth against it.

His job during the trial was to look like a sad miserable sick man. Advertising, his lawyer said. He felt sick. It was the only thing he could feel against the oppressive, radiating presence with him in the courtroom, thick and pervasive, tainting everything it touches, like smog. He could almost smell it. It didn't smell like smog. It smelled sharp, present, like an exposed wire. Like blood.

By the time Jack Crawford took the stand Will could barely see straight. HIs thoughts were abstract, fully realized concepts outside of his control, things he had an awareness of, but no agency over. His face felt heavy and the inside of his mouth felt metallic.

The man who got him back into fieldwork was going to ensure he never saw the light of day again. It was a tidy little parallel. It was all so very tidy. Meticulous. The space between his lungs felt like it was full of vinegar.

Jack didn't denounce him.

He said he was responsible for what happened. Everyone was so eager to believe he was helpless. He wasn't. Not then. Only sick. Hannibal gave him clarity, handed him his agency back on a silver platter, on the condition that he use it to do absolutely nothing. His heart pounded, sour in his chest and roaring in his ears.

People were filing out of the courtroom now, and Will's lawyer was saying something about Jack. Will finally felt like he was coming to, as much as he could. His lawyer was given a

package. He opened it. It was a human ear. For a moment Will thought it was Abigail's other ear. It would be enough to get him out. It wasn't hers. He was escorted out of the courtroom while it was collected. He wondered briefly if it was Hannibal. It couldn't be. His presence left the courtroom when he did.

Will learned the next day that the ear belonged to the bailiff working the trial. He was found dead, mounted on a stag's head, with his lungs removed and his face carved wide. His lawyer thought it might be enough to convince the jury he was framed. This plan required a new expert witness - Hannibal Lecter.

As Hannibal took the stand, Will wondered how this had happened. He wasn't the one who killed the bailiff, he was sure of it. He hadn't even put anyone up to it. Somewhere, he had a different admirer. Whoever this one was, his murderous favors were far more helpful than Hannibal's. *Does he really believe he's helping me?* He wasn't sure which was worse, to be the object of special punishment or the unwilling recipient of an experience meant to be enlightening.

The prosecution was asking about the cause of death now. A gunshot wound, as opposed to Cassie Boyle's death. Mutilation. Hannibal looked almost dejected as he admitted it. A nice little show for the courtroom as he dealt the final blow to Will's case.

There was no escaping a guilty verdict now.

Hannibal tried to catch his attention. Will ignored him and the false apology on his face. He hated that face and the man who hid behind it. His hands twitched and he imagined strangling him, beating his head against something until there was no head left, breaking bones and bruising flesh. Mutilation indeed. When he went to sleep that night, he dreamed the same.

Will woke up to a call from his lawyer. The judge had been found dead, shot in the chest, same as the bailiff. The trial had to be thrown out. He was soon greeted by Hannibal and Jack, who were there to relay the news personally. This time, when Hannibal tried to get his attention, he gave it. As Jack described the way they found the judge's body - positioned like the painting behind him, but with his brain and heart on the scales of Justice, Hannibal just looked at Will as a smile crept onto his face.

Will fought the urge to smile back.

Chapter End Notes

if you feel the need to scream you can find certifiedclown at willgrahampussypower and searchandrescue at seveneyesoup

falling into place

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hey.” Will looked up to see Beverly Katz standing in front of his cell.

He blinked a few times to clear his head. He had been mulling over last night’s conversation with his father. “You’re not who I was expecting.”

“Who were you expecting?” In truth, he hadn’t been expecting anyone.

“My dad. He came up for the trial.”

“Yeah, about that. It… it feels weird to say congratulations, but I feel like I ought to say something. You really lucked out there. Someone’s looking out for you.”

“Yep.” He flashed a mirthless grin. “Same person that put me in here. Speaking of, why are you here? It’s not to congratulate me on having some court officials turn up dead.” he stood up to face her.

“I wanted to make sure you were okay. I wasn’t sure you had anyone, seems like everyone here is here about you, not for you. Except your dad. I haven’t met him yet. I’m sure he misses you. We all do. They have Hannibal working the case for you, but it’s not the same.” She rubbed her thumb on the side of her hand.

“So there’s a case? I thought there might be.” Momentarily, Will felt cheated. Of course she was visiting him because she needed something. But no, it was fair. He had come to her when he needed help, and now she was coming to him. Turnabout’s fair play.

“I brought the file, if you wanna see.” She pulled it out of her bag.

“Sure.” Will took the file through the bars and opened it to find a thick stack of photographs.

“All people who went missing from their homes without their cars, same as the victims we found in the river. He’s preserving them somehow, but we can’t find a pattern. I mean, he kills across gender, ethnicity, age…” She threw her hands up in a gesture of confusion and crossed her arms, watching Will as he scanned the file.

“Could you give me a minute?” Will asked, taking the file to his bed to lay the pictures out.

“Of course. Take all the time you need. But Will,” she began, and looked him in his face. “You don’t have to do this if you’re not ready.”

Will nodded. “It’s not this that landed me here,” he said, gesturing with the file. “I was just sick. I’m getting treatment now. I can look at a case file.” He began to lay the pictures out, arranging them in no particular order. An order emerged, though, or the beginnings of one. He reordered them to see if the pattern held. It did. He was sure of it. He put the photographs back in the file and handed it back to Beverly. “He’s making a color palette.” She looked a little confused, but nodded, her brow furrowed, preoccupied.

“You don’t remember any of it, do you?” It may have been the first time Will had been asked earnestly.

“Well, if I did, I wouldn’t be---here.” He flashed a smile that showed only his top teeth and swallowed, looking down at the floor. He knew what it was like to kill a guilty man. To remember killing innocent people? To have that presence follow him like a spectre, to have a hundred other stimuli making him feel the way he felt when he thought of his throat and Abigail’s ear inside it? It would be better to die than to live with that knowledge. His tongue felt heavy in his mouth. “Sorry.”

“I’m sorry, Will. It was nice to see you.” Her voice was steady, but there was a discomfort behind it. As she walked away, Will could hear her footsteps. She was walking faster than normal.

Sometimes it felt like the world was against him, but his stream was always quiet and peaceful. It was calm, a place where he could rest and forget about his current circumstances. It was his favorite place now that he was under Chilton's eager care. It distracted him from the trial, the swirling mess of emotions in his chest, and the dark, seething shadows in his cell. *It's the only thing keeping me sane,* he thought, mirthless and dry.

At times, Abigail haunted the waters, and didn't that just make him feel awful, her ghost poisoning his safe place with her presence. It made him feel almost angry, before the guilt would overwhelm him and forced him back into the waking world. He opened his eyes against the echoes of her smile, and stared at his hands.

They should be stained red, he decided. But they weren't. His hands were clean and colorless, and he clenched them into fists, displeased at the sight. It felt wrong. Even though he knew he hadn't been the one to kill her, he still felt responsible. *All of his crimes are mine, right?* he asked himself, a smile attempting to tug at his unresponsive lips.

"Mr. Graham," a voice interrupted his musings, and he turned to the sound, meeting the eyes of the orderly with his own before settling them just past his shoulder. "I've been wanting to talk to you."

There was something in the way he spoke that gave Will pause. He shifted on his cot, turning his body to the man before forcing himself to meet his eyes once again. Immediately, he was reminded of Tobias Budge. The orderly - Matthew Brown - had the same darkness hidden inside his pupils. But his eyes didn't carry the same coldness - they were brighter, eager. Will tilted his head to the side.

"Matthew," he said smoothly, thinking of the horned creature in his dreams as he did so. He smiled. "What did you want to talk about?"

Matthew moved closer, the slow movement reminding Will of a panther. His eyes had the same predatory gleam. "You know, I admire you, Mr. Graham," he smiled, a slow stretch of his lips. His characteristic lisp was gone. "You were in the nest with the FBI, and none of them spotted you. If you hadn't gotten sick, well...."

Will considered that, leaning back on his cot to regard Matthew, a slow roll of his eyes, bottom to top. The young man held himself tightly coiled, but somehow relaxed at the same time. Ready to pounce. His eyelids lowered, and Matthew stepped closer to the bars, eyes rapt.

"Are you the one who killed the bailiff?" he asked, demure, eyelashes fluttering coyly. He was more than pleased to see Matthew's eyes darken at the soft tone. "Did you do that for me?"

"I killed the bailiff for you," he said eagerly, fingers clenching, as if he wanted to reach through the bars and touch Will. His face fell slightly, but his eyes shined as he gazed at Will's face. "I wish I could claim the judge, but that was....someone else."

Will's tongue darted out to trace his bottom lip. "Do you want to be my friend, Matthew?"

"Imagine if the hawks worked together, Mr. Graham," Matthew said, his voice soft and earnest - wanting. Will tilted his head to the side, exposing the warm expanse of his neck. The younger man's eyes fixated on the sight. "The little songbirds wouldn't stand a chance."

Shrikes are songbirds, Will thought abruptly. His fingers twitched against the drab blanket of his cot and his chest clenched oddly. Something hot and pleasant pooled in his stomach. He bit his lip and the feeling dissipated, replaced by the heavy weight of grief. *Abigail was a shrike.*

He closed his eyes, inhaled, and then forced himself to meet Matthew's adoring gaze. He smiled. "You can call me Will."

It was all Will could do to sit still as he waited for Hannibal to arrive. He glanced around the privacy room, looking to see which walls reflected each other, so he could watch for Hannibal without making it obvious he was eager to see him. He was surprised Chilton was letting them use the room for therapy. Will had insisted on it, claiming that he couldn't benefit from therapy if he didn't have a sense of security. He started tapping his finger on the

table, the sound echoing on the concrete and glass. Maybe it wasn't too surprising that he was in here. Chilton was afraid of him, and fear is easily exploited.

Will froze as he saw the reflection of movement on the wall. He took a deep breath and forced himself to relax, but his heart was pounding. As Hannibal opened the door, he wondered if he could hear it.

"Hello, Will." Hannibal draped his coat over the back of the chair before sitting down.

"Hello, Dr. Lecter." Will said it as smoothly and sweetly as he could manage, taking care to advertise that he was hiding something.

"Where should we begin? So much has happened since we last spoke at length." Hannibal looked at Will, waiting for a response. Will knew he wanted a thank you. He wasn't going to get one.

"I made a friend." Will smiled, but the slight curve of his mouth did not reach his eyes. Hannibal's lip twitched momentarily into a frown.

"Friendships provide an essential support structure during difficult times. Tell me about this friend. Who is he?" Hannibal put an arm on the table, leaving the other hand in his lap, and Will realized he was missing the armrests on his chair in the office. Will kept his hands folded on the table.

Will shot a glance at Hannibal. "He's the one who killed the bailiff for me." Hannibal hadn't seemed to be expecting that answer. Good.

"He wrote you a poem, Will. How will you respond?" Hannibal uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, mirroring Will's posture, an expression of careful concern on his face, assessing.

“Oh, I’ve already responded, Dr. Lecter. It’s nice having a friend.” He looked down at the table, then back up at Hannibal. “He’s not the only one, though. Matthew Brown is not the only person who’s killed someone for me. And I haven’t had the chance to speak to the other killer yet.” Something in Hannibal’s demeanor shifted. He felt closer, now, though he had not moved, as if he were allowing Will a peek behind the curtain. Will left the curtain well alone. “It’s good to know I have a friend who’s willing to go that far for me.” He looked Hannibal in the face, challenging him.

Hannibal took the bait.

“How do you know you only have one?” Hannibal pursed his lips and furrowed his brow, slighted.

Will took a deep breath and tapped his hand on the table. “I guess I don’t.” He looked back up at Hannibal and vaguely gestured toward him, shrugging. “It’s nice to be understood.”

Another frown. “Did Matthew Brown think you understood him? Is that why he reached out to you?” He watched Will, as if noting his reaction. If Will didn’t know better, he would think it was jealousy.

“No,” Will said, expressing the contempt he imagined Hannibal felt toward people who were overly presumptuous. “He thought he understood me.” He bared his teeth, equal parts smile and grimace. “He didn’t. He’s not---he’s not clever enough to see me. He sees black and white, and misses the--nuance that can be found in grey areas.”

Hannibal nodded. “A shame to spend so much time hiding in the shadows and fail to see the beauty in them.”

“There may be hawks and songbirds, but there are far more… interesting beasts to be found.” Hannibal took the compliment. Funny how he fell so easily for the same trick Will was mocking to him.

“There are shrikes,” Hannibal said, probing.

“Shrikes are songbirds, Dr. Lecter. The way Matthew Brown sees it, the hawks are above them. You and I. But he’s wrong. The world is a lot more interesting than that.” He watched Hannibal, assuming the same quiet self-assurance Hannibal used on him.

Hannibal seemed pleased by that. “There are more things in heaven and on earth than are dreamt of in his philosophy.”

“He uses that philosophy to understand, but it prevents him from gaining a true understanding. He sees a truth which is not feasible, and refuses to look at anything else.”

“Understanding does not always require philosophy, Will. Yours doesn’t.” Will wasn’t sure if that was an insult or a compliment. He shifted in his seat.

“You seem awfully sure about that, doctor.” He allowed Hannibal a moment of doubt, and then continued. “I don’t need philosophy to understand. I’m not like you. I see you, and I’m not impressed.” He considered adding the comment that Hannibal’s hidden depths were neither as hidden nor as deep as he would like to believe, but he thought better of it. He had said enough for now.

Hannibal looked wounded, but spoke with concern. “It offers me a barrier. You said before that you don’t have that luxury.”

Will inhaled sharply. “I don’t.” He let his eyes go blank for a moment. “But now I have a friend.” Hannibal sat back, crossing his legs, creating again that distance he maintained for everyone except Will. *He wants to be seen. He wants me to see him. And he’s willing to kill to make that happen.*

An orderly knocked on the door of the room. Will looked up at Hannibal, almost triumphant. “It looks like our time is up. I’ll see you soon, Hannibal.” He hid it well, but Will knew Hannibal was touched.

“See you soon, Will.”

As he made his way back through the halls of the hospital, Hannibal turned Will's parting words over in his mind. *Hannibal*. It was so rare that Will used his first name. He was proud of the progress Will had made. He was learning to set himself apart, to invite the distance from others rather than resent it. He was above them, and he was beginning to see it. He was finally willing to see it.

Hannibal stopped a nearby orderly. "Do you know if Dr. Chilton is occupied at the moment?" The young man shook his head, not meeting Hannibal's eyes.

"He has a meeting at four, but nothing else today." He looked down the hall as if he were unable to focus - or uninterested in focusing - on the conversation. Hannibal nodded and smiled at him.

"Thank you-" he glanced at the nametag. Matthew Brown. "Matthew." Matthew nodded and started back down the hallway.

So that was Will's friend. He barely looked capable of killing. He was small, almost boyish, and clearly believed himself better because of his capacity for violence without remorse. Exactly the sort of person to shoot someone before displaying them. The gun was an extension of the distance he thought made him superior. He would know superiority before he died. Hannibal would make sure of that.

Hannibal knocked on Frederick's door. He was about to knock again, expecting he was eavesdropping on his patients and hadn't heard the knocking, when the door opened. He didn't look too pleased to see him.

"Dr. Lecter."

"Hello, Frederick." Hannibal smiled politely at him. "May I come in?"

“Of course.” He returned a forced smile and opened the door. Hannibal stood by the desk, waiting to sit down until Frederick had. His laptop was on his desk, closed, and a glance at the loop of headphone wire sticking just out of a hastily closed desk drawer told Hannibal he had been right in assuming the reason he was so late answering the door. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?”

Hannibal sat down, draping his coat on the back of the chair. “I have a request,” he said, looking earnestly at Frederick.

“Do you? I was just about to pour myself a glass of wine. Would you like some?” Frederick looked at him expectantly. He was so desperate to maintain a sense of power around Hannibal. It was only polite to accept.

“Yes, please.” Hannibal watched as he walked over to the cabinet where he kept his wine.

“Red, or white?” Frederick looked back at him, two glasses in hand.

“Whatever you were going to have. I trust your taste.” Frederick scowled at that, but it was true. His taste was different than Hannibal’s own, and rather obviously began to be developed as a manifestation of his nearly all-consuming envy of the success of his more prestigious peers, but it had matured over time into something more complete and coherent, and his envy along with it, into a jealousy of Hannibal so strong he could almost smell it. Frederick returned with two glasses of a light red wine and handed one to Hannibal.

“I have a meeting in just under an hour, so while I would love to sit and chat, I’m afraid we won’t have the time. What is it you need from me?” He raised his glass to his face, then set it on the table. Hannibal gave him a moment to savor the satisfaction of being petitioned by him, and took a sip of the wine, a Spanish grenache.

He set his glass down. “I want you to have Abel Gideon transferred back here.”

Frederick opened and closed his mouth, lost for words. “You mean Dr. Abel Gideon? The man who tried to kill me? Who took my kidney? You want me to bring him back… here.” He pointed at his desk, touching his finger to it. “Absolutely not.”

Hannibal took another sip of the wine, taking care to seem sympathetic. “To be completely fair, Frederick, I don’t think he was trying to kill you. He was leaving that job to the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“That’s not any better,” Fredrick said, his voice high pitched with emotion. He stood up, leaning both hands on his desk. “He killed a nurse. And three other employees at this hospital, and all but two of his former psychiatrists, and not for a lack of trying.” He took a sip of his wine and looked down at Hannibal. “Why do you ask?”

Hannibal looked at the carpet and licked his lips, as if he were sorry to say the reason. “I need him as part of my therapy for Will Graham.” Frederick stared at him, shocked, and he continued. “I think it would be… beneficial to Will if they were allowed to talk, and it would be easiest to facilitate that if he was returned to this facility.”

Frederick seemed to be at a loss for words. Why shouldn’t he be? Will Graham was insult to injury. He sipped his wine, but didn’t seem to taste it. “Dr. Lecter---”

“I know you’re upset that Will Graham is not under your direct psychiatric care. It’s an upsetting thing, to be denied something in your own domain. I know it was Will that refused you, but I hope you do not take it out on him by refusing me the things I require for his care.” Hannibal sipped his own wine thoughtfully, a natural pause to seem more reasonable. “Frederick, you must understand that I ask you this out of a concern for Will’s wellbeing, not a lack of concern for yours. As the head of this hospital, it is your responsibility to provide for the care of your patients. I would hate to have to speak to anyone regarding this.”

Frederick leaned an arm on the back of his chair so he was slightly behind it. “If your care involves Abel Gideon being back under my roof…” He looked Hannibal up and down and shook his head slightly. “This must be a form of radically unorthodox therapy.”

“Less so than you would think.” He made eye contact. “I’m sure the state board would be very interested in your own experiences with Dr. Gideon and unorthodox therapy.” Hannibal took great pleasure in watching the color drain from his face.

Frederick gulped. “I’ll---I’ll make some phone calls.”

“Thank you. I would love to stay, but I’m sure you need to get ready for your meeting.” Hannibal stood and took his coat, giving him the opportunity to escort him out. He didn’t take it. No matter. He had already opened a far more important door for him. Hannibal smiled to himself as he remembered Will’s orderly. More than one door had been opened for him today.

Sleep did not come easily to Will that night. He kept dreaming about killing. He dreamed that he was being killed by the creature, or that the creature was killing someone else, or that he was killing, and though he could not see himself in those dreams, he knew if he saw his shadow it would have antlers. Guilt would have been a relief, but he knew he couldn’t feel any. Not about this. Borrowed emotions wouldn’t make the restlessness go away.

He was tired, body and mind, but he couldn’t stay asleep. It was like another mind, beyond his own, above it and inside it, was awake for the first time, and he was helpless to quiet it. It did not answer to him. He lay awake on his cot, focusing only on the foreign energy that had taken hold of his mind. If it was electric, it was electric in the way that industrial lighting was electric - a low hum permeating through everything he heard, harsh light, and not meant to serve humans, only meant to allow them to be of service. Will focused on the electricity sounds he could hear, and managed to drift back into a restless sleep.

As Will picked at his breakfast, he wondered if Matthew was dead. He wondered If Jack Crawford was going to ask him about his death. He wondered if Hannibal shot him, killing him in a way he would understand. No. *He’s---better than that* , Will realized. His death would be designed to be foreign to him, outside his understanding. His dying thought would be that he had been bested. He wondered what Hannibal would take from him. His heart, probably. He wondered what Hannibal was doing with the organs. He felt a heavy dark feeling in his head and chest as he realized. *He’s eating them.*

Will spent the morning sitting with the knowledge. How many times had he eaten with Hannibal? How many of those times had he been honest about the food? How many times had he discussed a case over a dinner made of the murder victims? Had he eaten Abigail Hobbs after all? More than anything, Will wanted to escape to the stream, but he didn’t dare. He didn’t want to poison the waters. He just had to hold out for another few hours. His dad was coming to visit.

He didn’t want to eat his lunch. It felt wrong to eat, somehow, like he was disrespecting Abigail. If his body was her final resting place, then he shouldn’t. It felt like trampling on a grave. He knew it wasn’t reasonable. If she had been disposed of properly, she had a thousand final resting places scattered to the winds. If she was part of him now, then his body kept her alive. The disrespect would be to not eat. He believed it. He had to believe it. He still couldn’t shake the feeling. *Abigail Hobbs, buried among prison food.* Will felt sick.

Relief finally came in the sound of Beau’s work boots echoing down the hallway. Will stayed on the bed, and Beau stood in front of the cell with his hands in his pockets.

“Hey, Will.”

“Hi, Daddy.”

“Tried to make you cookies.” Beau put his hands deeper in his pockets.

“Tried?” Will propped his arms up on his knees.

“Well, I succeeded in makin' 'em, but it turns out I’m not allowed to bring 'em t'ya. Figured I might could, since it don't take a fork or anythin’ to eat ‘em. Guess not.” He looked at Will apologetically.

Will shrugged. “It’s the thought that counts. Someone’s probably enjoying them.”

“Well I hope they choke on ‘em. They were meant for you.” Beau reached inside his jacket, then paused. He looked at Will and mouthed “*Camera?*”

Will nodded and Beau put his hand back in his pocket, disappointed. “When I was sick, Hannibal brought me chicken soup, only he didn’t call it that. He had these high-end tupperwares and he called it ‘selkie chicken in a broth.’ Not chicken soup, that’s for us common folk. ‘Selkie chicken in a broth.’” Will shook his head.

Beau made a face. “If meat ‘n broth ain’t a soup, then what is?”

“Exactly. It didn’t even have noodles in it.” Will smiled at Beau’s look of confusion.

“What, is he too fancy for noodles in his chicken soup?” He looked incredulous.

“Must be.” Will felt his headache return, and he rubbed his eyes to clear it. He shouldn’t have brought up Hannibal’s cooking. He inhaled sharply. “So, how are the dogs?”

Beau brightened at the mention. “They’re good. I keep losin' Buster, he hides under things. I always worry he’s got out an’ a snake’s gonna get ‘im. Not that you have snakes here, and it’s too cold for 'em anyway. It’s almost too cold for me, an’ I make my own body heat.”

Will dropped a knee, letting that arm fall in his lap. “Not living in Florida has its pros and its cons.” He blinked, bewildered. “Do snakes really eat dogs down there?”

Beau shrugged. “Maybe not, but they’re always talkin’ about it on the news how they could. They’re big enough, I once saw a snake near as big around as your leg. Could take a dog easy. Mostly eat rabbits though, lady whose husband’s boat I worked on had some that were givin’ her hell and tearing up her garden, one day a snake took care of ‘em for her.”

“Huh. Remember when mom tried to grow a vegetable garden? We had bushels of squash and a singular tomato.” Will smiled, remembering the jokes they had made about the “zucchini recipe” - leaving a basket of zucchini on a neighbor’s doorstep and being long gone before they could catch you.

“She was prouder of that tomato than she was the squash. Funny thing that, those were some damn good squash.” He smiled at the ground, a vague melancholy darkening his face to bittersweet.

“They were. I could grow a garden this summer. Might have a bit of trouble keeping the dogs out of it, though. They’re good dogs, but they’re so used to---”

The hall door slammed shut, echoing down the hallway. A set of footsteps echoed down the hall, high-heeled boots by the weighted clicks, and Will looked at Beau, raising an eyebrow. He shifted in his cot, hands resting on the edge as he prepared to stand. Beau turned to face the newcomer, a blank look of polite curiosity in his face, and Will stepped closer to the bars, something he didn't know had been squeezing in his chest easing at the sight of Beverly.

Her eyebrows were furrowed in concern and confusion, eyes taking in Beau's easy stance and Will's relaxed shoulders before it cleared. She smiled. "Sorry, am I interrupting something?"

"No, no," Will shook his head and returned her smile with one of his own - it didn't feel like pulling teeth. "Bev, this is my dad. Daddy, this is Beverly. She's a---friend."

"Oh, so we’re friends then?" her smile widened. She looked genuinely happy at the admission. Will's lips tugged upwards again in another smile. "Thanks, Graham, for the notice."

"You're welcome," he retorted dryly, an odd bubbly feeling in his chest swelling when she laughed at that. A glance at Beau revealed him to be watching with a soft expression in his face - relief and a sad fondness.

"Nice to meet you, ma'am," Beau said, all Southern charm. Beverly laughed again, delighted, and shook his offered hand. "Name's Beau. Thank you kindly for lookin' out for my boy there. He needs it."

"Sometimes," she agreed with a nod, and another smile thrown at Will - this one had a distinctly affectionate edge to it. "I'm just trying to be here for him when he needs me."

To Will's surprise and discomfort, that statement caused something hot and prickly to sting the back of his eyes, and he realized abruptly that he was tearing up. He blinked rapidly and dismissed the moisture, clearing his throat loudly against the sudden lump blocking his

airways. *How pathetic*, he seethed inwardly. *No wonder it was so easy for Hannibal to manipulate you*.

"Uh, what're you here for, Bev?" he forced himself to ask, pressing his lips together in a thin line as he studied the slight discoloration of the floor. "Is it about the case?"

She sighed. "Yeah, sorry, I didn't wanna bring this to you again, but I don't know what else to do."

"It's fine," he shook his head and pushed an arm through the bars, holding his hand out for the file. "Hand it to me, I'll look at it."

"Now hold on---" Beau started, but Will shook his head again. Beau rubbed at his jaw roughly and sighed. "Will, should you really---?"

"It's fine, Daddy," Will said calmly, looking at him meaningfully. "I can do it, don't worry."

"M'always gonna worry 'bout ya," Beau mumbled, shoving his hands into his pockets. "S'what daddies do, Will."

"I'll be fine," Will said firmly. Beau nodded and waved his hand in a vague gesture. Will smiled and turned back to Beverly. "C'mon, let me look at it."

"Okay," she said, eyes darting forth between he and Beau a few times before she passed it over. Will ignored the wide smile on her face, and opened the file, watching from the corner of his eye as her expression turned somber. "Again, I’m sorry for doing this, but something’s just not right about it and Hannibal is---kinda shit at doing your job, I won't lie. He's not a great replacement."

Will snorted. "Don't let him hear you say that, you'll hurt his feelings," he paused, eyes roving over the pictures and text before he closed the file.

Beverly stepped closer. "What've you got?" Will closed his eyes to consider, then opened them.

"Well, whoever did this is a practiced hand at it. This isn't the first time he's removed a limb. Or sewn someone up," he said quickly, tapping the back of his knuckles against the folder as he talked. "He'll probably have killed before, too. There's no hesitation, no nervousness. Just---a deep appreciation for the art. He felt... compelled to complete his work, but he wanted to execute his own vision. He's a sadist, intelligent, and he needs control. He'll be very hard to catch."

"Will, that's---are you---?" she halted, eying him thoughtfully before holding her hand out. Bemused, he passed the file back to her. "Thanks, Will, I appreciate it."

"Of course," he said after a moment, brows furrowed. He knew she wanted to say something else, but she held her tongue. He scrutinized her before pushing the matter away. He could ponder on it later. "How's---how's the rest of, uh, the gang doing? Price and Zeller, I mean."

Beverly smiled, amused. "Well, they're as annoying as ever. All they do is bicker. They haven't been dating long, but they're like an old married couple. You know, Jimmy corrected Hannibal on pronunciation ten minutes after meeting him. I've never seen anyone look so politely offended before. It was great."

Beau laughed. "Yeah, that little shrink friend a' yours, Will, he's a real fancy piece a' work. His suits are a mess, ain't they? Real funny lookin'."

"That's rich people for you," Wil shrugged before he smiled secretly. "I think he does it on purpose."

"What, dress up in three different patterns?" Beverly raised an eyebrow, incredulous. "Are you sure he's that aware? I thought it was just a European thing."

"Me too," Beau agreed. "Europeans are just like that, Will. Like us and plaid."

"No," Will insisted, shaking his head, "I really think he does it on purpose! To see if anyone will say anything to him about it, but no one ever has, so he still does it. It's---it's a power move."

"'Power move'?" Beverly repeated, her pitch raising as her eyes widened. "Will, I didn't even know you knew what lingo was!"

"Of course I know what lingo is," Will frowned. "Just because---just because I'm not social doesn't mean I live under a rock, Bev. And anyway, it's not even lingo, it's just a thing people say."

"Will's always been on the internet," Beau provided helpfully. "He's real big on stayin' up to date and such. I don't understand it."

"I have to," Will interjected. "I teach college students." It didn't help.

Beverly smiled again, wide and beaming and playful. "I can't wait to tell the guys. Zeller's gonna lose his shit."

"Please don't," Will sighed, head tilting back as he did. "You'll ruin my reputation."

"Son," Beau said seriously, and Will looked at him, concerned, "your reputation is already good and ruined."

Will's mouth fell open in shock and Beverly let out a loud guffaw, sides shaking as she tried to reign in her amusement. Beau simply gave Will a tiny, satisfied smile when Will reluctantly chuckled.

"Well," Beverly said once she'd regained her breath, "I think that's my cue to leave. See you later, Graham crackers."

And with that, she gave them a cheeky, two fingered salute and left. Will watched her back disappear behind the gate and finally turned to face his father again. Beau smiled at him, a wide grin that displayed his teeth.

"I like her," he said approvingly. "She's good for you. You deserve good friends."

Will returned the smile. "I like her too."

The next day was just like the others he'd spent at the hospital so far. It was slow, dull, and dreary. It felt like he was walking through thick molasses, and he found himself wishing for time to crawl by faster. It did differ a little from most days, though. Matthew Brown was late for work - *or missing*, a little voice said gleefully. *Maybe Hannibal's left him for you.* Will ignored that voice, crushed it down, silenced it. He didn't want to entertain thoughts like that; he didn't want Hannibal so far inside his head that he couldn't get him out.

Might be a little too late for that, he thought, noting the unwanted relish and excitement as a group of orderlies converged at his cell with the typical transportation equipment in tow. Obediently, he turned around and held his arms out as they unlocked his cell door and filed in after each other, methodically strapping him in. He held himself perfectly still as they put the mask on his face, tightened it around his skull, and pulled him onto the wheeled dolly. *Careful*, he thought with dry humor. *Aggressive animal, will bite.*

As they lifted him into the back of the van and began travelling to their destination, he wondered, nervousness and anticipation mixing around in his gut, what Hannibal had done to Matthew. Surely that had to be what this was about. *The Chesapeake Ripper strikes again*, he thought, stomach squirming oddly - unwanted. *Jack will be so pleased*.

When he was lowered out of the van, he was greeted by the familiar flashing blue and red lights and FBI vehicles. There were a few reporters, and he idly searched through them for that telltale flash of red. He had no doubt that Freddie Lounds was on the prowl. What a scoop she would get today.

The observatory was grim and still, and as he was rolled in, he wondered if he looked the same. Frederick Chilton's tender care had an accurate reputation - unpleasant and ineffective. He probably looked as dead and ghostlike as he felt. Maybe he looked like Matthew in that regard. Hannibal wouldn't like that.

Jack's grim face was the first he saw, and he looked at his eyes briefly before settling to stare at the bridge of his nose. "Thanks," Jack said to the orderlies, his tone dry. "I'll take it from here."

The two workers hesitated, looking from Jack to Will to Jack's firearm. They left easily enough, obviously assured that Will wouldn't try anything stupid. Jack efficiently freed him of his bonds and he stepped down, taking the dehumanizing mask off with a heavy sigh.

"Come on," Jack said tiredly, "you need to see this. Through there."

Will went where he had pointed, stepping into the wide room with the telescope in it, only to halt at the sight of Matthew Brown. It wasn't an overly shocking sight, of course. He'd expected it, known it would be him. But he hadn't expected the presentation. The message.

Matthew was on his knees with his arms at his sides, raised in surrender, hands splayed wide in submission. *Worship*, a voice whispered. His chest was hollowed out, the front of his ribs gone, skin peeled back - the lungs and heart were missing. *You take my breath away,* Hannibal said softly. *You've taken my heart for your own*. And his eyes - they were gone, replaced with groups of dianthus (considered the flower of the gods, a divine flower) barbatus. *Sweet Williams*, the man whispered in his ear, *admiration, passion, capriciousness, affection, love and gratitude.*

I love you.

It was a beautiful message. Will stared at it with wide eyes, unable to look away for several moments. He was completely caught off guard. He didn't know what to do with this information - *yes, I do*, he thought, lips thinning.

"The flowers are Sweet Williams," Jimmy Price said once he'd noticed him. "Their meaning is actually quite interesting---"

Will cut him off. "I don't think the meaning matters."

He looked away, back at the display, and just barely caught Zeller looking at Price with triumph clear in his eyes. Jack crossed his arms and stepped closer. Will noticed the gun was gone, tucked away, out of sight. He smiled grimly at that. *At least he trusts me enough not to kill him*, he thought with no small amount of bitterness.

"Well?" Jack probed. "Is it the Ripper?"

"Yes," Will sighed, rubbing at his eyes. "It's him."

Jack nodded. "What's his message this time then?"

"He---somehow he got too close, saw something he shouldn't have," Will halted, grinding his teeth. "Jack, this is an orderly. He was---he was sympathetic to me. Wanted to help me, he said. I think the Ripper didn't---like that."

"So he got too close to you," Jack said, eyes serious. "The Ripper wants you isolated then. Why?"

"Because I'm the only one who can catch him, Jack," Will smiled, but it came out more like a grimace. "Why would he want anyone helping me? Why else would---?"

He stopped, turning away to look at Matthew's corpse - Hannibal's love letter to him - again. Jack didn't say anything, but he could feel his eyes on his back - burning.

"He got too close, and this is his punishment. He saw something he shouldn't have and had his eyes taken away, but the Ripper couldn't have left it at that," Will laughed without humor.

"No, he had to tell us why he did it. He loves an audience to show off to."

"And the organs?" Jack asked.

Will closed his eyes. "The same--humiliation as usual. He's expressing his disdain, his---hatred for someone he considers lesser. No better than a pig. Matthew proved himself unworthy."

Jack said nothing to that. He only nodded tightly and escorted Will back to the straitjacket and mask. It took longer to get into it all with only one person securing the various straps, but by the time the orderlies returned Will was once again immobile and helpless. Before they took him away, Jack met his eyes.

"Thank you," he said and Will closed his eyes, shutting out the sight of grief in the other man's gaze. He didn't do it fast enough, and the weight of the emotion pressed down on his ribs on the long drive back to the hospital.

By the time he was back in his cell, free of the jacket and mask, he was exhausted and more than a little emotionally drained. But his mind wouldn't quiet. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Hannibal's gift to him - the proof of his affection for Will. The man's soft dulcet tones echoed in his head like a melody designed to torment and comfort him all at once, and when he finally did manage to fall asleep, it was fitful, and left his mouth tasting of blood.

At his next therapy session with Hannibal, he sat in his seat calmly, his expression docile. And when Hannibal took his seat and looked at him, he turned his head and allowed him a warm smile. It didn't feel quite real, or like it really belonged to him, but it echoed the strange warmth in his gut, and it must have been more than enough for Hannibal, for he returned it.

"I got your message," Will said, meeting Hannibal's blood colored eyes. He leaned forward and whispered, "*Thank you*."

Chapter End Notes

if you feel the need to scream you can find certifiedclown at willgrahampussypower and searchandrescue at seveneyesoup

free at last

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next few days were slow and listless, and they left Will with a feeling not dissimilar to how he imagined it felt to rot. He had the most absurd feeling that he was in a state of decay. *All I'm missing are the insects,* he thought, somewhat hysteric from boredom and restlessness - there was a strange energy just under his skin, an impatience that railed against his bones.

It didn't help that the orderlies were buzzing about in and out of the cell next to him, like bees in and out of a hive. It grated on his nerves, but Will watched the busy proceedings with rapt attention, something in the back of his skull latching onto the activity like it was imperative for him to know what was going on. It had Hannibal written all over it, and Will wanted to know why. *What's he planning?* he thought with wariness that warred with a strange glee he didn't want to understand.

Thankfully, he wasn't left stewing in that mix of confusion and wariness for long. Will had been expecting many things when he'd first heard the commotion, but what he hadn't been expecting was Abel Gideon.

"Of all the prisons I expected when I was told I was being transferred," the doctor said in that slow, careful way he spoke - a kind of speech that always sounded mocking even when genuine, if it ever truly was, "I never expected to end up back here."

Will felt an inexplicable urge to smile at that, so he did. The expression tilted his lips gently upwards in what he was sure looked like an entirely unprompted besotted look. *Oh,* he thought, and didn't quite know why. *Oh.*

"Really?" the smile felt strange on his lips, he decided, but not unwanted. Or unwelcome. "Seems to me like this is exactly where you'd end up."

"And why is that, Mr. Graham?" Gideon asked, voice snide and curious at the same time. Idly, Will wondered how he did that. "I'd love to know."

“Because this is right where he wants you to be, Dr. Gideon,” Will replied, making sure to keep his voice just as snide. The smile was somehow still audible.

“Frederick? Well, what we shared was intimate,” the man mused and Will’s grin widened. He suspected it looked rather manic now. He wondered what Chilton would think of that. “However, people tend to take it a little personally when you rearrange their organs.”

“How personal?” he asked, that strange giddy thing in his chest expanding to fill the spaces between his ribs.

“Oh, *very.*”

“If it’s any consolation, it wasn’t personal when I tried to kill you,” Will told him.

“Oh, I know. You were just looking out for the lovely Dr. Bloom,” he responded before he paused. And then, he asked, “How is she doing? Or has she lost interest now that you’re at my social standing?”

Will’s jaw clenched, and the smile dimmed. “No,” he said finally.

“Oh,” Gideon said, and his voice was higher than it was before. “Is there someone else?”

Will opened his mouth before the thought hit him. His mouth closed with a clack - teeth snapping down on teeth - and he smiled again, halfway between amused and completely pleased. “Do you want to know why you’re here, Dr. Gideon?”

“Will you be so kind as to tell me if I ask nicely?” Gideon asked with that curious lilt to his voice still present. “I’m just *dying* to know.”

Oh, you will be.

“To help me. For my therapy. And maybe to shine some light on who the Chesapeake Ripper is, after all.”

“I see,” Gideon said slowly, considering. There was a short pause before he spoke again, dry in his gratitude. “Thank you, Mr. Graham, for that *telling* information.”

“Don’t tell me you still think you’re the Ripper,” Will said, eyebrows raising even though Gideon couldn’t see him. He was sure the judging mockery was still evident in his voice. “You’re the pretender to the throne.”

“Who convinced Frederick to bring me back?” Gideon asked and that time he sounded serious, as if he had suddenly realized the game he was playing wasn’t much of a game after all. “I’m the last person he wants to see.”

“You know who the Ripper is. You’ve met him,” Will said, ignoring his question. He’d answer him soon enough. “So why are you still playing pretend?”

“The Ripper's playing out a mannerly dance, getting close, but not too close, offering tokens of goodwill, but not giving away too much.”

“He gave you away,” Will hinted. The smile pulled at his lips again, and he let it. Laughter bubbled in his chest, fizzing against his ribs like sparkling water, sharp and bubbly. Oddly enough, he felt like he was watching a child struggling to solve a puzzle he held all the missing pieces to. “I remember that night, you know. The night I took you.”

He hummed. “The night you tried to kill me.”

“How do you think I found you? He sent me to kill you.”

“Am I your evidence?” Gideon asked before he chuckled, soft and low. “Oh, you’re in trouble, Mr. Graham.”

Will laughed as well, as if he was in on the joke. “No,” he breathed on an exhale before he said in an equally mocking tone, “no, you’re a gift.”

There was a pause, consideration - a stillness that Will could almost imagine he could taste, the sharp tang of apprehension. “To you, or from you?”

Will paused as well, and then he leaned back against the wall, shifting just enough that Gideon would hear the movement. “What do you think?” he asked finally, and his voice was deceptively soft for the threat he had just delivered.

"First session with Doctor Hannibal Lecter," Gideon drawled lazily from his cage across from Will. He sounded equal parts bored and intrigued - it was an odd mix, but one Will shared. "I must say I'm quite nervous."

"And why is that, Dr. Gideon?" Will probed, an almost cruel grin tugging at his lips. "You've never met him before, never...offended him. No need to fear a mild-mannered stranger."

"Mild-mannered stranger and the boy next door," Gideon mused quietly. "The boy next door who ate the girl next door."

"Allegedly," Will cut in, an upset swelling in his stomach, waterlogged like submerged corpses. "Innocent until proven guilty."

"Yes, that is what they say," the man agreed easily. "But the evidence and rumors always speak louder."

"Then I'll have to shut them up," Will countered, running sweaty hands over his legs, gritting his teeth against the rough, stiff texture of the jumpsuit. "So justice can be heard. Can't argue with the crack of the gavel."

"No, you cannot," Gideon sighed. "It's why I'm here."

It's why you'll stay here. He didn't say it, but Will heard it all the same.

"You belong here, Dr. Gideon," Will told him, ignoring the itching at the back of skull that sounded much like whispers. *You belong here, too,* they said, and he couldn't quite drown them out. "You and all the others too dangerous for polite society."

"Wouldn't that include you?"

Will closed his eyes and breathed. "No," he said, "I'm not dangerous at all. The boy next door, you said."

"The boy next door, yes. But next door to whom?" Gideon said, considering. He took in a breath as if to say more, but the door to the therapy hall opened and whatever he was going to say stayed curled under his tongue.

The soft sounds of footsteps echoed throughout the large room, and Will waited with bated breath, opening his eyes just as they stopped.

"Hello, Will," Hannibal said, his eyes crinkling at the corners with a smile.

"Hello, Hannibal," Will returned, cursing the swell of warmth and soft pleasure that surged through him at the sound and sight of the other man. He stuffed his hands under his legs in an effort to keep from reaching out to Hannibal. "It's good to see you," he murmured quietly before he could stop himself, forcing his lips into a thin line.

"As it is to see you, dear Will," Hannibal said softly, warm affection clear on his face. Then he turned to Gideon, inclining his head ever so slightly. "Dr. Gideon."

"Dr. Lecter," Gideon returned almost pleasantly. "Do I not get a 'dear'?"

"I'm afraid that's reserved for friends," Hannibal replied smoothly, taking his seat with a flourish, coat elegantly folded in his lap.

"I don't think that's professionally standard," Gideon said. There was a short pause and then he said, "Though I'm not sure what passes for professional these days. Frederick did so like to push."

“Precisely why I could not allow Will to be under his sole care.”

"Yes," Will said, cutting into the conversation between the two rudely. His face heated up tellingly when Hannibal turned his attention back to him, his eyes shadowed by his brow, somehow both intense and intimate despite the wide room and the space between them. Will tilted his head back, exposing the line of his throat, and looked back at Hannibal with lazy eyes. "Frederick would only fumble around my skull, clumsy and unpracticed. Not like you, Dr. Lecter."

Had he been in the office instead of a 4x4 cell, he would have made his way to Hannibal’s desk while saying that, watching his eyes follow him as he moved. Instead, he just blinked and looked up at him through his lashes. Hannibal watched his face intently, and with a slow smirk growing on his lips, Will let his tongue peek out, swiping across his mouth in one slow, smooth movement.

"I, of course, will only ever handle you with the utmost care," Hannibal said with his lips parted, head tilting to the side as he regarded Will with a heavy gaze. "As you deserve, Will."

Only the best, his eyes seemed to say.

Will imagined he could almost feel it against his skin and shifted, bringing his hands back to his lap, resting one on each thigh lightly. Hannibal's eyes followed the motion and Will blinked at the thrum in his veins, that same quiet sense of power he felt at Garret Jacob Hobbs' death settling into his bones.

"Forgive me for speaking out of turn," Gideon began, "but your utmost care has put me in dear ol' Frederick's care again. In a direct line of fire, you could say."

"I'm terribly sorry, Dr. Gideon, but you are not my patient. Will is," Hannibal said cordially with a look that clearly stated what he thought of Gideon, which wasn't good or bad - Gideon meant nothing. "And I'm not currently taking new patients at the moment."

"That's a shame," Gideon said with a mocking regretfulness. "We could learn so much from each other."

"Could we?" Hannibal asked with a pleasant disinterest before returning his attention to Will. “Let’s begin."

"Whenever you're ready, Dr. Lecter," Will murmured, spreading his legs wider, shifting his hands just a inch higher on his thighs as he leaned back in his chair, titling his head to the side so his curls fell over his eyes in a way he knew made him look demure.

Soft and willing, if only for that shyness that held him back. Hannibal would eat it up, and he did. And Will watched as he did, admiring the way Hannibal's eyes darkened further with a heady satisfaction burning under his skin, boiling his blood.

"Well, to begin with," Hannibal crossed his legs, "we should determine what you do remember. What can you tell me, Will? Anything you can recall with confidence."

Will hesitated, biting his bottom lip, worrying it between his teeth until he knew it'd be red and swollen before releasing it with a parting lick. "Um, I'm not sure," he said quietly, as if confessing to something terrible. "It's---a big blank in my head. Like I was sleeping, but I didn't have dreams. There's---nothing there. Like trying to catch rain with a net. I can't."

And it was true. Every time he tried to regain those memories, he got nothing but blank space. Big, fat cuts to black that meant nothing to him. It had already caused so many headaches, trying and failing and trying again to remember something that was buried so deep he couldn't even touch its edges.

"Doesn't that just sound so familiar," Gideon observed. "I wonder who's been playing around in your head. I'd love to meet them."

You have, Will thought viciously, closing his eyes against Hannibal's image, but it was engraved into the backs of his eyelids. He could see him so clearly in the dark of his own head, so he opened his eyes and looked at the real Hannibal, who shot Gideon a short look before focusing on him once again.

"Will, I know you're afraid of the truth, but it's been haunting you," Hannibal leaned forward and spoke softly, as if he wasn't speaking to Will at all but a cornered animal, teeth bared and eyes wild. "If you can remember, you can better control the thoughts plaguing you. I'm here to guide you to accept the truth, Will. I'm going to help you."

Will swallowed and closed his eyes again, opening them to blink away the tears suddenly burning at the corners. "Okay," he said hoarsely, forcing the not entirely false words out of his mouth, "I trust you."

"Very good, Will," Hannibal smiled, and Will didn't know if it was praise or a statement.

He breathed through his nose and leaned further back in his seat, staring straight up at the grating of the cell's top, the fire roaring in his body simmering down to flickering embers in the wake of the halted tears. It didn't go out, not entirely, and when Will looked back at Hannibal and met his eyes, the flames licked against his insides.

"Let's start with what I think you most remember and the one that was most justified, your attempted murder of Abel Gideon."

"Oh, so that's why I'm here," Gideon realized. His voice was bitter and Will suspected he looked it as well. He didn't look, choosing instead to admire the line of Hannibal's shoulders in his suit. Tailored softness hiding hardened muscle.

"It is," Hannibal agreed. "I understand that was a traumatic event for you, and understandably so, but I believe it would greatly benefit both you and Will to discuss it."

"I'm sure you do, Dr. Lecter," Gideon said, "but you'll have to forgive me for not wanting to talk about my near-death with the man who tried to kill me. No offense, Mr. Graham."

"None taken," Will assured with a slight smile, amused despite himself. "I'd find it hard too, but it wasn't personal. You don't have to worry about a second attempt."

"Oh, that's very reassuring," Gideon mocked. "I feel very safe."

"If I wanted you dead, Dr. Gideon," Will said, voice trembling against his teeth, "rest assured, you'd be dead."

"So you say," Gideon murmured quietly. Will felt the urge to turn and look at the man, but ignored it; instead, he focused his attention on Hannibal once again. He was smiling. Will felt dismay at the warmth curling in his stomach at the sight of it.

"Well, we'll attempt to come back to it later then," Hannibal allowed graciously, dipping his head to Gideon - all while looking at Will with that strange intensity in his eyes. "Will, do you have any recollection of the crimes you've been accused of? Even the faintest sensation of memory would be beneficial at this stage."

"No," Will shook his head, "I don't. I don't remember anything."

"I see," Hannibal leaned forward in his chair. "What about feelings? Emotions are an important part of memory formation. You spoke before of a quiet sense of power. Have you felt that again, Will?"

Will felt anger at that - at the reminder, the reveal of a secret he'd trusted Hannibal with, a secret the other was laying bare. He grit his teeth. "No," he managed. "I don't. I didn't. I didn't kill anyone."

"But you did, Will," Hannibal seemed to sigh without sighing, leaning back in his chair to observe Will in his cage - an animal on display for the masses. "You killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs. You've taken a life. Who's to say you didn't take a few more? The evidence certainly suggests you did."

"That wasn't me," Will protested, feeling lost again - moorings of sand, blown glass left to shatter. He felt that betrayal again, sharp and insistent. "I didn't kill those people. I didn't."

"Didn't you?" Hannibal asked softly, so softly Will thought he wasn't meant to hear it. He opened his mouth to defend himself or question Hannibal's meaning, but the other man was already moving on. "It appears we are at an impasse. You do not remember anything nor does it seem that you want to. I can help you through this denial, Will, but I cannot help you if you choose to remain in it."

"Dr. Gideon," Will started, desperate to change the subject, "do you remember that night? When I tried to kill you."

"I'm sorry to say that I don't," Gideon responded, snide and mean. "The shock of being shot must have wiped it all away."

"And you, Will?"

"No, I've got nothing," Will shrugged, smiling stiffly. "Seems we're both useless, Hannibal. Sorry about that."

"Will," Hannibal frowned, "you could never be useless to me. Your inability to remember is through no fault of your own. There is no use blaming yourself for it."

"It's hard not to," Will sighed. He looked at his hands. "I keep thinking that maybe it was me. And maybe I'm just too scared to accept it. Remembering would be admitting defeat."

"It is easy to find comfort in the warmth of the flame as you watch the shadows dance, Will," Hannibal told him, “but though the light may hurt your eyes at first, you must not stay in Plato’s cave and forsake the real world. You’re better than that."

"Like you are?"

Hannibal smiled approvingly. "Yes."

"Dr. Lecter, earlier you said ‘dear’ was reserved for friends," Gideon said abruptly, his voice slow and considering. "You two seem to be an awful lot more than that."

There was silence after that. Neither Will nor Hannibal seemed to know how to react to that statement. Will's eyes went wide and he looked away from Hannibal, and hoped neither of the other men noticed the heat rising up his neck.

Eventually, Gideon took pity and broke the silence. "But I'm insane! So what do I know?"

After that first session with Hannibal, Will and Gideon quickly fell into the habit of having conversations before lights out at 8:30 pm, quickly followed by wishing each other goodnight. It was nice, in a way, and Will found himself becoming almost fiercely grateful that Gideon was his neighbor. He still didn't particularly like Gideon, and he didn't want to be there, but if he was to be here and have a neighbor - well, he was glad he got stuck with Gideon, who was reasonably intelligent company.

One night, about a week or so after their first therapy session and the strange friendship that followed it, Will didn't get a response. Unease coiled in his stomach at the silence - like the

snake in Eden coiled around the tree, tempting Eve into taking a bite of the apple. Will felt like he was on the precipice of something. He felt like he was standing at the edge of a cliff, waiting for something to push him over, be it his own will or someone else's. Will didn't know what to do with the restless feeling, so he rolled over in his cot and tried to ignore the unpleasant texture of the provided blankets. Sleep didn't come easily, but it never did.

The next morning, Will woke with a cut-off gasp, his heart thump-thump-thumping in his chest. He was pushing himself off the cot as soon as his eyes opened, his mouth tasting strongly metallic and salty, like thick iron - hot and cloying. He hadn't had any nightmares in a while, and while he couldn't remember this dream, Will knew how the nightmares made him feel upon waking.

He groaned, sitting up in the creaky cot to push away the thin blankets, exposing his sweat-dampened prison suit to the cool air of the hospital. His stomach protested the movement and he paused, one hand resting just over his belly, rubbing at the skin there in a soothing circle. He sat there in silence, waiting for the sick feeling to lessen.

Eventually, it faded and Will felt secure enough to move. However, before he could, an orderly opened his cell door and deposited a set of clothes next to him with something like pity and guilt swimming in his eyes. Will stared after him in shock, frozen where he sat, until the man had left, leaving the cell door unlocked.

There were a few long moments that seemed to hang in the air, and then Will moved and got dressed, eagerly switching out the soiled prison suit for the clothes. He was more than grateful to be rid of the texture of the suit, the sensation of a perfectly soft undershirt on his skin preferred and more than welcome. It was such a simple thing, but he could almost cry. Months without simple comforts left him weak in the face of them once again, and he found himself clutching at the jacket with trembling hands.

God, he thought sardonically, *if I'm like this about clothes, what's a shower going to be like?* Hot water might almost be enough to make him feel human again.

Footsteps echoed down the hall and Will carefully pieced his composure back together, turning to face whoever it was coming to speak to him. He blinked when the light in front of his cell revealed Chilton. The stuffy man hadn't visited or even spoke to him since their first few failed therapy sessions, if they could even be called that. It was generous, and Will never felt very generous toward psychiatrists. He was right to liken Chilton to a virgin fumbling

through his first time concerning his brain and concoction of neuroses, he thought. It was an apt description.

"The federal prosecutor has dropped all charges," Chilton said once he was standing in front of Will's cell. He spoke stiffly and quickly, as if praying for the interaction to be over as soon as possible. "Since you weren't convicted of killing anyone, the basis for your sentencing to this institution is null and void."

"This is very sudden," Will drawled lazily, approaching the door. He pushed it open with palpable relish, delighting when Chilton took a rapid step back when he stepped out. He stopped, head tilting to the side in a single jerky movement he knew made him look dangerous. "Did something....happen?"

"Yes," Chilton managed, sniffing as he retreated a few steps further. "As a matter of fact, something did happen. The Chesapeake Ripper has set you free."

"Oh?" Will smiled. "Bet that's just eating you up inside. You'd love nothing more than to keep me here, wouldn't you?"

Chilton's expression soured. "Yes, I would. Personally, I do not think you are....ready to be in polite society again. But as I am not your psychiatrist, that is not up to me, and Hannibal can be very convincing. Even when his judgement is....clouded, so to say."

"Then it's good you're not," Will told him, as if confessing a secret. He smiled, slow and wide, unnerving. "I don't know what I'd do if I was kept here. I think I'd go crazy."

"Would you?" Chilton swallowed, nervous. Will wondered how hard his heart was beating, if it was hammering in his chest, rabbit-fast and just as frightened. He hoped it was.

"Oh, yes," he said with something like a snarl, a smile, resting on his lips. "What would you have done? You haven't learned much since Gideon, have you? So arrogant. You wouldn't be able to stop me."

"I see," Chilton let out a sharp exhale, a fearful laugh. "I suppose I will have to be more careful in the future, and be grateful that there wasn't a repeat attempt on my life."

"Yes," Will said, his eyes flat and bright all at once with the promise of freedom and home just ahead of him. "You do that."

And with that, Will left, leaving Chilton to his fear and cowardice. It felt good. Being feared felt good, and Will hated himself for it. But he savored it, as well, relished it. He craved that sense of power, that control. He was almost scared of what he would do to get it, but he was too far in to be scared now. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't sit back and observe forever. Sooner or later, he'd have to participate. *Might as well start now*, he thought, grimacing to himself when he entered the therapy cages.

For months, these same cages had been more than a prison to him. More than just a punishment. Looking at them made Will feel sick and unsteady, like it was his first time in a boat, only he was alone, stranded in the middle of the ocean. Abandoned to the tide. That was a good word for what he felt, abandonment. It festered in his chest like an infected wound, oozing pus and other fluids. A state of decay. Will swallowed down the taste of bile pooling in his mouth and turned away from the rusted metal.

At the end of the hall, past the shafts of sunlight streaming down from the large windows, near the stairs, Jack Crawford stood, bold and imposing against the clinical elegance of the hospital. His coat was dusted with a light sheer blanket of snow and he looked out of place, oddly so for a man normally so confident. Will cleared his face and donned a mask of careful neutrality as he approached, raising one brow in question.

"You need a ride?" Jack asked, awkward and nervous. Will almost didn't hide his bewilderment at the question.

"I was going to call my dad," he said slowly, carefully. A little of what he was feeling slipped through the cracks and into his voice, and he shrugged once. "But thanks. For the offer."

"Of course," Jack murmured. "Do you need to borrow my phone?"

Will blinked. "Um, yeah, I guess so."

At that, Jack looked relieved. He handed over his cell without saying another word, and Will dialed his dad's number, watching Jack out of the corner of his eye as he turned away to make the call. It rang a few times before Beau picked up. His voice was a balm and soothed something restless in Will's chest, even though he'd seen the man not long ago.

"*Graham,*" Beau answered, gruff and slightly sharp. He sounded upset. Will frowned, concerned.

"Hey, Daddy, it's me," he said quickly, chewing on the inside of his cheek. "I got released today. Did something happen?"

"*You're out?*" Will made an affirmative noise. "*Oh, hell, that's good news. I'll be there in a minute to come pick you up. Lemme take care of the dogs first, yeah?*"

"Yeah, okay," Will agreed, listening to the shuffling sounds on the other end with fondness. "You didn't answer my question."

"*What now? Oh, that,*" Beau paused to shout *'git outta that!'* at one of the dogs - probably Buster. "*S'nothing. I'm just havin' a lil' trouble with this damn dog. He's a rowdy one, ain't he? Can't listen for shit.*"

Will laughed. "The Terrier?" he asked, laughing again when Beau confirmed. "Yeah. He's one of my oldest, so he thinks he runs the place."

"*How the hell do you get 'im to mind?* " Beau groaned, yelling again after. "*He wants t'chase just about every damn thing that moves.*"

"A lot of patience," Will told him, smiling. "Can't let him think you're giving in. It's like fishing---"

"*You gotta wait 'im out, I got it,*" Beau sighed. "*Well, I'm gonna have to let you go now. Gotta get 'em in the house. I'll see you in just a minute, okay? I love you*."

"Love you too, Daddy," Will said before hanging up. He turned to Jack and handed the cell back, nodding at the man. "Thank you."

"No problem," Jack told him, fingers curling around his phone. He hesitated, seeming to wrestle with himself before coming to a decision. "We found Miriam Lass. Alive."

Will's heart felt like it stopped. His skin broke out in goosebumps and his hands became unbearable clammy. He swallowed. "Oh? Um, how is she?"

"Traumatized."

"Yeah," Will croaked out, clearing his throat. "Don't beat yourself up too badly. Trauma victims recover. Disaster has a way of putting life into perspective. She'll be fine, Jack."

"She thanked me, Will," Jack said in a rush, as if he couldn't hold it in any longer. He looked pained. Grief was etched in every line of his face. "When we found her. For not giving up on her. But I did. I gave up on her, and I gave up on you. I stopped trying to find you both."

Will let that sit, digesting the words and their meaning slowly. It was as close to an apology as he would get with Jack, and Will found he appreciated it. It didn't fix everything, it couldn't, with how much Will was keeping from him, but it was a nice start. It felt good to still have a friend in Jack. He hadn’t realized how much he'd missed it, and he didn't know how long he'd still have it.

"You didn't have to find me, Jack," he joked, rolling his eyes at the room with a quick gesture with his hands, an almost shrug. He sighed when Jack didn't budge, and placed a hand on the man's shoulder. "It's fine. You---you didn't do anything wrong, okay? It's fine, we're fine, and I'm going home soon. Everything worked out okay."

Jack nodded, his shoulders slumping. The relief he felt at the reassurance was obvious on his face and Will smiled at the sight of it, the weight on his chest feeling lighter than it had in days. He pulled his hand back and stuffed it in his pocket, leaning his weight on his hip. But something nagged at the back of Will's head, that same anxiety he felt at discovering Miriam was alive reappearing anew. His bones felt full of energy, buzzing with it - like bees in a hive.

"Where did you find Miriam?" Will asked, trying to settle in his skin. Jack seemed grateful for the question and the consequent distraction it offered from further emotional connection.

"In a barn. On a property out in Virginia, actually," he answered. He paused, his face thoughtful, before asking, "Would you come take a look? I could use your insight on this."

Will frowned. "Just because we're okay doesn't mean I want to go back to working with the FBI, Jack. I just got released. Give me a few days."

"Right," Jack nodded with a sigh, lips quirking upwards in an amused smirk. "That's fair. Just don't, uh, don't tell your father I asked, alright?"

"What? Why?" Will blinked before he smirked too. "What, are you scared of him or something?" Jack didn't respond and Will's mouth fell open in shock. "God, you are. Jack, that's---"

"I'm not---scared of him," Jack protested before he deflated. "I respect him. He raised you, after all, and God knows you're hard to deal with."

"Can't argue with that," Will sighed, peering out the window. He was just about to continue when his eyes caught sight of his car. "Ah, there he is now."

Jack looked as well. "I see," he said softly. Then he clapped Will on the shoulder and said, "Well, Will, rest up. I'll see you in a few days."

Will agreed easily and quickly exited the building, leaving the warm confines to the crisp, winter air. He shivered, pulling the jacket tighter around his body, and speed-walked to the car, eager to escape the cold. The door was unlocked when he got there and he climbed inside quickly, fingers already red from the crisp air.

"Hey, Daddy," he greeted, pushing his fingers close to the vents to warm them back up. Beau laughed.

"Hey yourself, son," he said wetly. When Will turned to look at him, his eyes were shining. "Ready to go home?"

"Yeah," Will smiled, "let's go home."

Beau had just gotten the dogs settled in after what felt like a small eternity when he noticed the car outside. It was a moderate sized black jeep, four doors, sleek and clean. It looked almost new and completely out of place in the stark white of the rural winter outside. Beau was immediately suspicious. His eyes narrowed and he crept closer to the front door, grateful he'd kept the blinds near closed and turned his head, peering out of the window in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the owner.

He briefly caught a flash of red, almost fiery hair and paused, moving to the kitchen to watch through the windows above the sink as a woman walked through the snow to the shed, pulling something out of her bag that glinted a sharp silver in the cold winter sun. She looked around and, seeing nothing, crouched to get to the padlock. She was picking it, he realized with indignation.

Before he'd fully registered what he was doing, Beau had his coat on and his hands firmly on the shotgun Will kept under his lure station. He opened the front door quietly and tread on the snow lightly, taking care to step in the strange, rude woman's footprints. Once he was sure he was close enough that she would hear it loud and clear in the crisp air, he cocked the gun and leveled it at her.

She froze at the sound.

"Hands up," he said calmly. "And turn 'round. Slowly now - I don't want no funny business."

The woman did as she was told and slowly turned to face him, her face one of neutral thoughtfulness - some form of apathetic curiosity, a conundrum. The scrutiny of her gaze made Beau feel off-kilter, but he was a grown man. She was near Will's age, too, by the look of her - maybe younger. He had nothing to fear. And yet he still felt a trickle trepidation shiver down his spine.

Like a rabbit meeting a fox for the first time.

But Beau Graham was no rabbit. Still, he could recognize a threat when he saw one. Maybe not to him. Perhaps to Will.

She smiled, and he quickly decided he didn't like her. "Beau Graham, I presume?" She somehow asked without really asking. Her voice was friendly, falsely so. Beau's ire grew. "I'm Freddie Lounds."

"Ah, you're that no-good reporter a' Will's, ain't you?" Beau realized, frowning. "Didn't think you'd resort to trespassin' an' breakin' in, but I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Vultures like you will do just 'bout anythin' for a story."

"This is just a misunderstand---"

"No, it ain't," he interrupted, gesturing with the shotgun, bringing her attention back to it. "I know good and damn well what you intended to do. Ain't no use in tryin' to convince me otherwise."

"Alright," Freddie conceded. "I won't do you the discourtesy of lying to you then. I was going to break in."

Beau nodded, making sure to give her a look that showed exactly what he thought of her for stating the obvious like that. Her lips grew thin. "Tell me why," he told her.

"I smelled a story," she said simply. "Will Graham's been arrested for several murders. It makes...sense that he'd keep trophies. Killers usually do."

"My boy ain't no killer," Beau rolled his eyes. "The only things' that're in that there shed are boat motors an' tools."

"If you say so," she smiled, but it wasn't nice. It wasn't mean either. It lacked anything of substance behind it, a simple flex of the facial muscles meant to soothe. It fell flat. "You know you're a hard man to find, Mr. Graham. I didn't expect to see you here. I suppose Will gets that from you."

"You mean you didn't expect to get caught," he snorted, hands curled tight around the gun. He considered lowering it for a moment, but her eyes were as flat as her smile. He didn't think she'd attack him - that she even had it in her to do so - but he knew the gun was the only thing keeping her in check. He kept it on her. "Apparently not enough. You still found me, even if it was by accident. Pretty shit detective work there. Must be a shit reporter too, lackin' skills like that."

"An attitude too! Will gets a lot from you, I see," Freddie laughed, a trickle of real amusement in her smile and eyes now. "I wonder what else he gets from you. After all, they say the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

Beau blinked and said simply, "I don't know much about apples, but they say one bad'un spoils the bunch. You'll have to forgive me if I don't like reporters much."

"Not many people do," she sighed, a sharp, mocking edge to her fake smile now. "It's hard to make an honest living these days. No one cares for the real stories. Sensationalism has its hooks in deep. It's hard not to be a bad apple."

"I'm sure," Beau said dryly. Abruptly, he remembered the phone call he'd had earlier with Will and was anxious for her to leave. "It's been lovely chattin' with you, Miss Lounds, but

I'm goin' to have to ask you to leave now."

Her smile widened, looking far more genuine as amusement and a vicious type of delight overtook the mocking edge. "Of course," she said, dipping her head, her eyes glinting in the cold light. "I'll just get out of your hair then."

Beau didn't respond to that. He simply gestured with the gun and walked her to her car, retreating to the porch to watch her leave. She didn't linger and left as quickly as she'd come - silently, too, which explained how she'd managed to get all the way to the shed before he'd noticed her presence.

After he was sure she'd gone, he sighed and let the tension bleed from his shoulders, returning to the warmth of the house to put the gun away and retrieve the keys. He quickly checked over the dogs once more, made sure they had plenty of food and water just in case the trip took longer than anticipated, and then exited the house, locking the door behind him. It was with an anxious anticipation buzzing through his bones that he made his way to Will's car, starting the engine and beginning his journey to the hospital.

On the way there, Beau was overcome with a trembling, vulnerable sort of emotion - happiness mixed with relief and some small measure of sadness that this had all happened in the first place. It wrecked through him without reprieve and he found himself having to pull over more than once to compose himself. He was just so happy that Will was out of there, that he was coming *home* where he belonged. Beau almost couldn't stand it.

My little boy, he thought as he got closer and closer to his destination, tears in his eyes. His little fae child was coming home.

It took longer than he wanted it to, but soon he was pulling into the hospital's parking lot, waiting with bated breath for Will to come walking out. When he did, he was wearing that green jacket Beau bought for him when he decided to move to Virginia all those years ago, with his glasses pushed firmly up his nose.

Beau's eyes welled with fresh tears at the sight and he'd just wiped them away when Will crawled in, taking his place in the passenger's seat. He turned and smiled at Beau, his face relaxed in a way it hadn't been in the weeks it'd been since he was first brought in for processing - since Beau came down to be here for him.

Something in Beau released a quiet sigh of relief at the sight and he relaxed in his seat, unashamed that his eyes had begun to sting with tears again. He returned Will's smile, knowing it was more than a little watery from all of the emotion he was feeling, and basked in the knowledge that Will was free now - if not safe, at least that.

"Hey, Daddy," his son greeted just like he did all those weeks ago - just like he did when he came home after his first fishing trip on his own, carrying a cooler full of catfish and brim.

Beau's smile dimmed slightly at the first memory - at the contrast of the Will in the second one and the one in front of him now. With a heavy heart, he took in how pale Will was, the dark bags under his eyes and the dull color of his curls. His bright-eyed little boy was drained of life. He took comfort in the fact that it would only be a short while before that was remedied. Like hell was he going to let Will punish himself further after this. He had suffered far too much already and Beau was here to take care of him - as long as he needed.

"Hey yourself, son," he echoed the same words he'd said then, clearing his throat when they came out wet with unshed tears. At the sound, Will turned to look at him and he mustered a smile, asking, "Ready to go home?"

Will returned the smile, an excited gleam in his tired eyes, an echo of that excited little boy peeking through the dullness there. Beau knew he was thinking of his dogs. "Yeah, let's go home."

At first, the drive back to the house - he was going home, back to his little boat on the water - was spent in silence. Beau focused on the road, letting Will lean his head back against the passenger seat and bask in the gentle reassurance that this was real. He was really going home. Soon, he'd see his house, he'd see his dogs, he'd be back in his safe place. A tension he hadn't known was still in his shoulders and spine released, and he sighed, gazing out of the window at the fine blanket of snow.

"We should celebrate," Will said finally, breaking the comfortable silence. He shifted in his seat and turned his head to face Beau, a small smile settling on his lips. "What do you think we should do?"

Beau mirrored it, eyes darting to him before returning to the road. "We could get matchin' tattoos or somethin'. Nice father-son bondin' time."

"Yeah?" Will snorted, amused. "Tattoos of what?"

"Why, Marlin and Nemo, 'course!" Beau declared. "You used to be obsessed with that movie. It was your favorite. It'd be perfect, Will."

"No," Will vetoed the idea immediately, shaking his head. "I'm not a kid anymore, Daddy."

"C'mon now, Will, it's the most perfect father-son tattoo out there," Beau tried, his smile growing. "You watched that movie so damn often the VHS tape wore out. And I did, too. You just 'bout drove me crazy with it."

Will sighed, attempting to look put out but the smile ruined the effect. "I haven't even seen it in years."

"It's gotta be Marlin and Nemo, son," he was adamant. He laughed when Will rolled his eyes in response. "C'mon, you know I'm right."

Will laughed under his breath before asking, "Why don't you get it then?"

"Listen," Beau's smile grew, his eyes sparkling with mirth, "didn't I come all this way to find you?"

"Ugh, shut up," Will groaned, narrowing his eyes at his chuckling father. "You're not funny."

"I don't know now," Beau disagreed. "I think I'm pretty funny."

"Oh, yeah, sure," Will muttered, staring out the window again. "You're a real riot."

"Glad you agree," his father said smugly before he changed the subject. "If we ain't gonna get tattoos, then why don't we cook up somethin' real nice? Maybe your mama's chicken n' dumplins. We ain't had that in a good bit, have we?"

Will brightened, straightening in his seat. He opened his mouth to agree, recalling the familiar, comforting taste on his tongue unconsciously before he paused. Unwillingly, the memory of his mother's simple, warm chicken broth warped into that of the one Hannibal brought him while he was in the hospital. While he was suffering from encephalitis, going out of his mind from a brain on fire, scared to death of his own mind, scared that he was going insane. All while Hannibal knew.

The taste soured in his mouth and his previously good mood dulled to something dimmer, less bright and easy. He grunted, clearing his throat, and forced his tongue and lips to work, "Yeah. That'd be great."

"Maybe we can make it together?" Beau continued, too caught up in his head to notice Will's mood turn. Will felt relieved at that and closed his eyes, resting his head against the cool window as his dad spoke about bone broth and how "easy it is to make, Will, really. I don't see why you can't---"

His father's voice faded away, dull like Will was under water, drowning in the quiet of the stream, and he felt safe, almost despite himself. The horned creature was in the water too, after all.

And it was looking right at him.

Its lips moved and Will squinted through the water, trying to make out what it was saying. It was too dark. He couldn't see clearly enough. He couldn’t see anything. The shafts of light filtering through the surface did so little to illuminate it, leaving it in dark suspension, as if it came from the darkness itself. Had it come from this darkness? *My darkness.* The thought felt like a cold film scraping against his teeth, and he felt a shudder race down his spine with cold metal fingers.

Still, he moved closer. He had to know, even if it was him. Especially if it was him. When he opened his mouth to call out to it, nothing came out. No air, no sound, only the same dark water where the light struggled to shine. Then, his mouth was flooded with something thick and hot and metallic.

It was *blood.*

A soundless scream left his mouth, all of the air in his lungs leaving him in one fell swoop, and Will tried to move, tried to *get away* , but he couldn't. The ocean - it was an ocean now, vast and empty and turning so so red from the blood born from his throat - was oppressive, and it kept him in place, rendering his limbs heavy and uncooperative. All he could do was float as best he could, fighting his body's urge to flee, waiting for the creature to come to him.

And it came.

As it got closer, as it became visible, and its features became more and more legible until Will could finally see it in its entirety. It looked almost like Hannibal, he noticed, though that thought was not a comfort. He watched in a daze as it steadily grew closer, until, finally, it was looming over him. He found himself unafraid; instead, he was almost eager, almost excited, a steady thrum of misplaced glee pounding through his suddenly racing heart.

He could see it so clearly now.

"Will," it said, whispering reverently, *"Will."*

He blinked, staring up at it. It gazed back, its pupil-less eyes intent with some emotion he couldn't read. There was a raw quality to it, and Will found he couldn't look away. Even if he could, he wouldn't want to.

"Will," it said again, its voice rising in pitch, almost painfully so. He winced at the piercing screech, his hands finally moving, covering his ears at the harsh sound. It echoed in his skull.

"Will!"

With a start, Will woke up.

"Will, son, are you alright?" he turned his head, blinking blearily to meet his father's concerned gaze. With a groan, Will straightened and rubbed at his eyes, nodding his head, unsurprised at the light sheen of sweat beading on his brow. "You sure?" he nodded again, and Beau sighed. "Right. Well, we're home. C'mon, the dogs've missed you somethin' awful."

"I've missed them too," Will said easily, rubbing the last remnants of sleep from his aching eyes. The dream lingered at the back of his skull, the sound of the creature's almost longing cry quite eager in his ears, and he found himself ready to get rid of it - the leftover imagery dancing just behind his eyes and the phantom throbbing in his eardrums from a sound too loud and too sudden.

With an enthusiasm born of the need to dismiss that image, Will opened the car door and stepped out, listening intently as the snow crunched in an achingly familiar way under his weight. Really, it has only been a few months, barely a handful, but Will suddenly felt strikingly overwhelmed. Every sound, every sight, every smell - every single stimulation to his senses was abruptly too much and not at the same time.

This isn't enough, Will thought with a pain lancing through his chest. It radiated outward, spreading to his lungs, causing them to seize up and his breath to hitch. He almost coughed, almost whimpered, but he bit down around it, swallowed it down with a familiar stubbornness.

You don't have to suffer alone, Will, Hannibal said in his head, and he wanted to scream.

This is too much, he thought again, nonsensical. And yet somehow it still wasn't enough. Will felt a pang in his very lungs, like this hunger had missed the turn to his stomach and had to make due somewhere else. It was a visceral feeling, oversaturated almost and loud. Wil felt so very hungry, aching for more. *Gluttonous.*

"Daddy?" his lips moved without any conscious decision on his part and he wrapped his arms around his sharp ribs, unable to take another step.

Overwhelmed. He hadn't been overwhelmed like this in such a long time. It was unnerving. Too much. *Not enough.*

Will had the sudden, striking urge to dig his nails underneath the layers of skin and synovial joints in his neck, and scratch until the cartilage and bone was lodged underneath his nails, and everything felt raw and painful. It would be better if his body reflected the raw vulnerability his mind did; he'd feel more control if it were a physical ailment, a reflection of the inner turmoil. In response to that violent urge, he trapped his hands underneath his elbows and dug blunt nails through the fabric of his shirt and jacket, pressing hard at the hungry ribs hidden beneath.

"Daddy, I can't---move," he said, feeling just as small and scared like he was when he was a child, despite how large his bones felt in his skin. Too large, there wasn't enough room, he was going to burst. *Pop goes the weasel,* he thought, the words messy in the confines of his skull. "I can't---I can't move."

"That's alright, son," Beau said gently, coming to stand beside Will, just inside his reach. "Focus on my voice for me, yeah? Jus' listen to what I'm sayin'. Can you do that?"

Will thought about that. "Yeah," he nodded, relaxing slightly. His dad always kept him safe, and this was no different.

"I'm goin' to push you a little bit, alright?" his dad said, placing one firm hand at Will's back. "Just to get you started. If you need me to keep on pushin' I can. And then you can hug on your dogs for a bit before we start cookin'. Some food will do you a world a' good."

"Okay," Will nodded, looking at the ground. His shadow made the snow less bright and easier to look at. The dulled white expanse of it was a balm on his senses and he nodded again. "Okay."

Beau pushed, gentle but firm, and Will was released from his frozen muscles. He took one step and the next after that was easier and soon he was standing in front of his door, his father a reassuring presence behind his back. Slowly, he released the tension that had built up in his neck and shoulders, and let his arms fall simply to his sides, the skin of his ribs stinging dully from the prolonged pressure of his nails - even through fabric it still hurt.

"Thank you, Daddy," he said quietly, gingerly moving to open the door. Quickly, he snapped his fingers with his other hand, stopping his dogs in their tracks. His dad chuckled and slipped inside after him, closing the door as Will knelt to give each of his pack some much-needed attention. Their happy, doggy faces were welcome and sorely missed, and Will sniffled as he blinked back tears, smiling at them wetly.

Beau gently ran a hand through Will's curls as he stepped past him. "I'm goin' to go ahead and get the broth started. I'll wait for you 'fore I start making the dough."

"You'd better wait," Will laughed through a closed mouth, leaning away from excited doggy kisses. "That's my favorite part."

"I know," Beau laughed, eyes shining as he watched Will with his dogs for a few more seconds before moving to the kitchen.

Will spent a few more minutes getting reacquainted with his dogs, his cheeks hurting from smiling. The familiar tactile sensation of the soft sleek fur of his pack was calming and familiar, and he kept giving them each long pets through their coats, along their spines, starting from the neck and ending at the rump. At some point in the chaos of lolling tongues and wagging tails, Winston and Buster had wormed their way into Will's arms, paws scrambling at Will's knees in an attempt to get closer. Will's smile widened and he laughed, a choked sound, scratching the two behind their ears.

"Alright," he said after a few last pets, forcing himself up to his feet. "That's enough. Be good."

He snapped his fingers and pointed towards the living room where their beds resided, signaling to them that play time was over for now. With a few dejected looks from his clingier mutts, the dogs did as he bade and went to lay down, leaving him free to join his dad. He toed his shoes off, put them on the rack next to the door, and hung his jacket up,

wandering into the living room to deposit his glasses onto his nightstand before entering the kitchen.

"Had your fill of dog fur already?" Beau asked, turning to raise his eyebrows at Will disbelievingly. He was standing over a pot, stirring occasionally, and adding some spices Will was certain hadn't been in his kitchen before his arrest.

"For now," Will answered, approaching the various bowls and spices littering his counter. "Did you go shopping recently?"

"You were locked up for almost three months, boy," Beau said, giving him a look as he finished throwing spices into the broth, putting the lid on the pot so it could simmer undisturbed as they got the other ingredients ready. "'Course I went shoppin'. You had next to nothin' in this house. You need to eat more."

"Can't argue with that," Will sighed, relieved that the chicken was already shredded and ready to go. "When'd you start that? It's already done."

"Started it las' night, but I wudn't feelin' up t'makin' it all on my lonesome," his dad shrugged. "Comin' in handy now, ain't it? All we have to do is get the ginger and celery sliced, and the dough made, and then we'll be ready to roll."

Will nodded, moving to the sink to wash his hands before joining his dad again, taking the knife handed to him with some reluctance. Being trusted with a sharp object was a stark difference to how he'd been treated at the hospital. Everything there was made of durable, soft plastic - the kind that's hard to break into a sharp edge. Hard to kill someone with that kind of equipment. It was by design, he supposed.

Beau began humming, a bright upbeat melody that Will remembered fondly from his childhood, and from there, it was easy to get lost in the many steps of preparation they had left. The time passed quickly, and soon they were done, the chicken and dumplings ready to be served and consumed. Will's stomach growled and the smell was welcome, but his mouth tasted sour with bitter-tinged, hard to swallow memories.

Does Hannibal hum when he cooks? Will thought at the table, wordlessy staring at the bowl Beau has set in front of him. *Does he sing under his breath? Dance in the kitchen?*

It was a compelling thought - Hannibal moving and twisting around his kitchen as he cooked, an unintentional smile on his severe face, one born of enjoyment rather than the intent to manipulate. Will felt heat creeping up his neck to his ears at the image, and pushed it away harshly, gripping the spoon in his hand so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

"Eat, son," his dad urged gently, jolting Will out of his head and back into the present. He blinked and Beau sighed, exasperated but fond. "C'mon now, it'll be cold 'fore too long."

"Sorry," Will rubbed at his eyes and began eating, forcing himself to think of better things than the sharp but gentle bite of Hannibal's 'selkie chicken in a broth' had. "I got….distracted. It's a lot. I'm---I'm having a hard time believing I'm out."

"I understand," Beau said kindly. "It was rotten what they did to you, boy. You take your time. Ain't nobody gonna tell you ya can't. I'll set them to rights if they do."

Will laughed. "Okay, Daddy, whatever you say."

"I will," Beau said fiercely before he relaxed in his seat, leaning back as he looked at Will. "Now, what's goin' on with you and that psychiatrist of yours?"

Will barely kept himself from choking. He swallowed and looked at his dad, shocked. "What?"

"Didn't know how to ask over text and I sure as hell wudn't gonna bring it up while you were in that damn hospital," Beau shook his head. "But I know there's somethin' there, I ain't stupid. So are you gonna tell me or am I gonna have to wait for the weddin'?"

"Daddy!" Will said with wide-eyes, his accent bleeding through with the shock. "I'm not---I'm not talkin' boys with you. And there's nothin' to talk about anyway. We're jus' friends."

"I dunno 'bout that, Will," Beau squinted at him, a smile playing on his lips. "I've got a mighty keen eye for these sorts a' things."

"Not so keen with this one," Will denied, heart thundering his chest. He was flustered and he knew that wasn't helping his case.

"We'll see," Beau said, letting the subject drop. Will was grateful and held in his sigh of relief, looking down into his bowl.

"Don't hold your breath," Will mumbled, stuffing his face with food after so he wouldn't have to talk again.

Thankfully, Beau caught on that Will was done talking and the conversation faded out, the rest of the meal spent in a comfortable silence. That silence was only broken later when they were cleaning up after eating, Beau washing while Will dried.

"Hey, Daddy?" Will started, his voice pitching in question as his nerves got the better of him. He noticed that his hands were shaking, and carefully set the plate he'd been drying down before he dropped it. "I'm thinking of going back to working with the FBI. I'm going to take a few days to myself before I make the decision, but I'm---I'm probably going to go back."

"Are you now?" Beau asked, his voice soft and Will nodded, picking the plate back up. "Well, I ain't happy 'bout that, but I ain't gonna stop ya. I know it's what you've wanted to do since you was little. Jus' be careful for your old man, ya hear? And tell that boss a' yours to come talk to me. I've got some words to say to 'im."

"Okay, Daddy," Will smirked. "Don't scare him too badly."

"We'll see how it goes," Beau grunted. "Now, is he wanting you to go look at somethin' for him? That why you're telling me?"

Will nodded. "Yeah. They, uh, found something. Something to do with the Ripper. They need their best and brightest on the case."

"And you're it."

"And I'm it," Will agreed.

And I'm going to keep them from finding him.

Taking a few days turned into taking a few weeks. Will wasn't complaining. He hadn't had this much time off since he started consulting, and it was a welcome break. Much more restful than a forced one via imprisonment. He spent the time with his dogs and his dad, dividing his time between them as equally as he could, sharing his stream with his dad so they could go fishing together again. It was a nice change of pace - peaceful and easy.

It didn't last. But that was fine. Will was prepared for Jack's call, so when it finally came after almost three weeks of silence, he wasn't surprised. He just listened to the agent speak and agreed to come in as soon as he could, taking the time to say goodbye to his dad and leave him in charge of his dogs once again before he left.

On the drive there, Will found he was equal parts glad and resentful he hadn't had to go investigate the place they'd found Miriam. Glad because he didn't want to see more evidence of the monster Hannibal was, and resentful because he did. He wanted to know Hannibal entirely, but he was afraid to. Still, he craved. An awful sort of hunger that never abated, unhealthy in its intensity.

Idly, as he parked and made his way to the interrogation room, he wondered if this was how Hannibal felt about him. If he found nourishment at just the sight of him. Will did, seeing him. He wondered if he ached. Will hoped he did. Will knew he did. They were the same. Alone without each other.

"Hey, Jack," Will greeted, emerging from his thoughts as he entered the room overseeing the interrogation, hidden safely behind one-way glass. Miriam Lass was standing next to the man, and Will offered her a tight smile he knew was less comforting than intended. He nodded at her, and turned his focus back on Jack. "Who's being interrogated? You never said."

Jack hesitated. Will waited, but the man kept his silence long enough that the door to the interrogation room opened and the person being interrogated stepped in. Alana was already in place, waiting patiently for the unsub. So it didn't make sense for it to be Hannibal.

Will's breath halted in his chest. Panic and fear gripped him in its needle-thin icy fingers, and he whirled around to face Jack with wide eyes. "You suspect Hannibal? Why---why didn't you tell me? You have to have known---why am I here? I can't be here. I shouldn't be here."

"Will," Jack said, "we found a partial of Dr. Lecter's prints. We have to do this."

"A partial means nothing, Jack, especially when it comes to the Ripper," Will snarled, anger abruptly winning over the panic and fear making his heart race. "Are you really going to make the same mistake you did with me again? Don't you fucking learn?"

Jack flinched. "Will---"

"Shut up," Will snapped. He turned to Miriam, saw her hunched shoulders and fearful eyes, and softened. "Sorry, Agent Lass. You do what you need to do."

"Okay," she whispered, inching closer to Jack. Will stepped away from her, leaning against the door and he watched Hannibal through the window. It seemed that while Will scolded Jack, Hannibal had already said his greetings to Alana. The two were talking amicably now, and the sight made Will's stomach twist unpleasantly, his teeth set on edge.

"They've found a witness. A survivor," Alana started, her voice quiet with solemness. *"The only victim of the Chesapeake Ripper who lived to tell."*

"Is this witness watching me now?" Hannibal asked, his eyes slowly panning around the room. Alana nodded. *"I see."*

"I'm sorry, Hannibal," Alana said, her voice tightly controlled. *"I wish I could tell you why this is happening."*

In response, Hannibal stared at her with a blank face before he turned his gaze to the one-way window. He stood, slow and precise with his movements. *"This witness must not be able to identify the Ripper by sight. Jack wants them to hear my voice, otherwise, I'd be in here alone. Right?"*

Will grit his teeth together as Hannibal placed a hand on the edge of the table on the side Alana was seated at, meeting her gaze. She nodded, a slight movement that Will almost missed, and Hannibal blinked. He inclined his head and faced the window once more, his eyes probing.

"I appreciate your company, nonetheless," he said, stepping past Alana to approach the window. He stopped only a few feet away from it and let his eyes pass over it in one smooth movement. One smooth movement that only halted toward the end, where Will happened to be standing.

Will froze. A lot like a deer in headlights did. His breathing felt cold and heated all at once in his chest, and his blood trimmed hard under his skin, racing through his veins. He'd never felt more like prey trapped in a predator's gaze before, and some part of him, an uncomfortably large part, found he liked it.

"It's not him," Miriam Lass said abruptly, turning away from the window to stare at the ground. Jack released a heavy sigh - one of relief, one Will echoed.

"Are you sure?" he asked, his voice light despite the gravity of the question he'd just asked. Miriam nodded.

"He's not the Ripper."

Will had heard all he'd needed to hear. He grabbed his coat and stormed out of the room, making his way to his car with a single-minded determination. Jack chased after him. Of course he couldn’t make it there undisturbed.

"Will, I need you in my office," the man barked, and Will's lip curled as he turned to follow the man, gripping his jacket tight enough to feel the unpleasant ridge of the zipper digging into his palm.

Unpleasant, but grounding. It reminded him of where he was and who he was going to be speaking with, and by the time they were inside Jack's office, safe from prying ears, Will felt considerably calmer.

"I know you're not happy we had to bring Hannibal in," Jack started, "and I want to know why. Explain it to me. I need everything you have on this, Will."

"Because it's the Ripper, Jack," Will said, throwing his jacket down on a chair to run a finger through his unruly curls. "It's the Ripper and you can't trust anything you find at his scenes. Nothing. Everything you find will lead you away from him, and to someone else, someone innocent in all of this."

"Like you and Dr. Lecter," Jack mused, his eyes darkening with sadness. He sighed and steepled his hands together, leaning forward. "Then how do we catch him, Will?"

"Whimsy. You'll catch him when he's in a fit of whimsy," Will said, a connection forming before his eyes. He kept the light of discovery to himself and lied through his teeth. "It won't look like whimsy to you or me, but that's what it'll be. That, or boredom."

"Why?"

"Because he's playing a game, Jack, like he always is," Will told him with a slow drawl to his voice. "And he's using it to prove to us how good he is at it. That he's the best, renowned in

his field," he smiled, oil-slick and smug like he knew something they didn't. "He's showing off his feathers. Peacocking, as it were."

"And when he gets tired of that, we get to see his feathers in person," Jack caught on, nodding. "I want you back on this, Will. Look over previous files, talk to Miriam if you need to, I need your all on this."

"Well, you have it," Will said and Jack smiled.

"Good to have you back, Will."

Will mirrored his smile. "Good to be back."

The next few days Will spent doing just as Jack asked: he looked over old and new files, and he talked to Beverly and the guys about any evidence found, and he even talked to Miriam Lass. Nothing new turned up, of course, but he knew that already. Still, he spent his time with his head down as he waited for Hannibal to drop his final piece.

It happened sooner than he thought, and soon Will was driving all the way to Quantico again, once more to spend his afternoon overseeing an interrogation with Jack Crawford.

This time, Jack told him beforehand who they were bringing in, and Will only barely kept himself from laughing aloud at the name he was given. Frederick Chilton. Laughable though it was, he fit the profile Will had given Jack. Too well for Will's guessing, in fact. He wondered if Hannibal had something to do with that. He most likely did.

When Will got there, Chilton was already in the room, dressed in orange and cuffed to the table. It was an indignity they hadn't imposed on Hannibal, and one Will felt a vicious delight seeing the peacock stripped of his feathers. He gave Jack a nod, taking a seat this time, and after checking on Miriam, Jack signalled for Alana to start.

"It's not like you to hide an achievement, Frederick," Alana began, and Will had to cover his mouth against a giggle at the use of Chilton's first name. Already he had lost his credibility.

"The achievement is not mine," Chilton insisted.

"Then whose?" Alana asked, raising an eyebrow. *"Abel Gideon was found dead and mutilated in your guest bedroom, along with two dead FBI agents in your kitchen. Frederick, the evidence stacked against you is remarkable. There's no room for pointing fingers anymore."*

"You really will not consider my innocence," Chilton breathed, defeated. *"The same thing that happened to Will Graham happens to me."*

"What goes around comes around, Frederick," Alana told him and Will was taken aback and flattered at the vicious quality to her tone. *"I suggest you accept that now."*

"You do not see it, and you will not see it until it is too late," Chilton murmured. He looked despondent. *"I believe these should be my last words on the subject of the Ripper until my lawyer arrives."*

At that, Alana leaned back in her chair, cocking her head to the side as she considered Chilton. It seemed as though the interrogation was over to Will, so he made to stand, glancing over to Jack and Miriam as he did.

Miriam was shaking, her eyes wide and glassy with tears, lips trembling. "It's him. It's---it's him. It---"

Jack reacted quickly, pulling her to his chest and into his arms. She went easily, a heart wrenching wail leaving her throat, a sound that made Will flinch and pull his coat tight to his chest as if could protect him the way Jack was attempting to protect her. "Shhh," Jack said quietly. "It's alright."

But it did not calm Miriam. "Jack!" Will shouted, having noticed too late. He watched as Miriam turned with Jack's firearm and shot Chilton between the eyes.

Part of Will was impressed - her aim was as sure as her conviction. The rest of him was concerned for Alana. Thankfully, she'd fallen to the left as the glass shattered, and avoided being caught in the line of fire. The glass hadn't even touched her.

"Jack," Will said, "you need to take her someplace else. Away from here."

"Right," Jack said on an exhale. "Will, you go home. I'll---I'll clean this up."

"Okay," Will agreed. "But---call me if you need me. I'll be here."

"Thanks, Will," Jack said, his eyes grateful. Will nodded, hesitating, before he forced himself to leave, head reeling.

He needed to see Hannibal. Tonight.

Will hurried home, speeding so he could get there earlier, and burst through the door with wild eyes. "Daddy!" he called out loudly, ripping his shoes off and throwing his coat down before rushing into the living room. He had an hour to get ready if he wanted to make their standing appointment on time. *Thank God, it's Thursday,* he thought frantically, grabbing his one pair of black slacks and the pink button down Hannibal had said looked good on him once. "Daddy! I need you to cut my hair!"

"What?" Beau yelled, coming down from his room upstairs, regarding Will wiggling into his admittedly tighter than remembered slacks with raised eyebrows. "Ya need to cut your hair for what? Oh, keep the old shirt on and get your ass in the bathroom. Don't want to get any stray hair on that nice shirt there."

"Right," Will nodded and hung it back up so the dogs wouldn't get on it, hurrying after his dad. He did as Beau directed and sat down on a chair Beau had dragged with him. "Thank

you, Daddy."

"You want it the usual way?" Beau asked, digging for the scissors. When he found him, he looked at Will through the mirror and waited for his answer. Will nodded. "Alright, be still then. I'll be quick since you seem like you're in a hurry."

"I am," Will said, picking at his nails to keep from bouncing his leg. "I only have an hour or so to get there, or I'll be late."

"Where are you even goin' so late?" his dad asked, scissors snipping away efficiently. "It's almost 7 o'clock."

"To see Hannibal," Will told him and immediately regretted it. "We used to, um, hang out every Thursday. He set a time for me at 7 P.M."

"And he's kept it open all this time?" Beau asked. Will didn't like the way he said it.

"I don't know," he confessed, leaning back when Beau told him to. They were almost done. "I think so. He would. For me."

"And you're absolutely sure there ain't nothin' goin' on between you two?"

"There isn't," Will scowled and stood up, running two hands through his lighter hair to shake out any stray cuttings.

"Sure there ain't. Hey! Keep your hands off, I got it," Beau smacked his hands away and pushed him back down into the seat, pulling the hair gel put from the cabinet. Will waited just long enough for him to get done before rushing to escape the conversation.

Quickly, he changed and pulled out his nicest jacket before getting his newest pair of shoes. He pulled them on and made for the door, hoping he was fast enough to miss any last minute

comments from his dad.

"Have fun on your date, son!" his dad yelled, proving Will had no such luck. "Use protection!"

Will's ears burned all the way to Hannibal's office. The lights were still on, so Will had hope that he was still there. As he pulled closer, he saw Hannibal's Bentley and breathed a sigh of relief. He was definitely still there. Will parked and carefully exited the car, closing the door as softly as he could before entering the building. He waited until it was just before 7 P.M, and knocked, turning around to face away from the door so he would have time to collect himself.

Hannibal opened the door. When he spoke, his voice was warm and welcoming. "Hello, Will."

Will steeled himself against the clawing emotions in his gut, deep where his honesty lived, and turned. "Hello, Hannibal. May I come in?"

Hannibal smiled. It was the same smile he gave Will when they'd first met - the one he likely thought Will hadn't seen. It was soft and fond, like they were old friends then as they are now. As they had been before Hannibal ruined it all. Hannibal stepped aside and let Will enter. As he passed the other man, Will noticed the casual attire and considered his own. A slight role reversal. *Not for the first time today,* he thought, remembering Chilton in the interrogation room. Had that been a gift for him? An apology?

"Are you expecting someone?" he asked, slowly walking into the center of the office, right in front of the chair he used to frequent, staring up at the rows of books high above him.

Hannibal spoke from behind him. "Only you, dear Will."

"You've kept my standing appointment open," Will stated, turning slightly to face Hannibal. He kept his expression neutral and controlled, focused. Even when Hannibal gave him that smile again.

"And you are right on time."

"I have to deal with you and my feelings about you," Will began softy, running his tongue over his bottom lip. "I think it's best if I do that directly, don't you?"

Hannibal was silent for a long moment before he said, "Yes. You have to grieve for what is lost and what has changed."

"I've changed," Will confessed, his voice becoming breathy. He swallows and when he speaks again, his voice is steady once more. "You've changed me."

"The friendship we have is over," Hannibal remarked. And then he said, his voice almost shy, "The Chesapeake Ripper is over."

Will heard the unspoken confession---*I did that for you, to prove my devotion. I ended the Ripper for you, Will.*

It was a heady thought. Will wanted it to be true, and as he looked into Hannibal's eyes, he knew it was. He felt powerful.

"I'd like to resume my therapy," he said, overcome. Hannibal stared at him, his eyes at half-mast, and then he nodded, taking his usual seat. Will mirrored him.

"Where shall we begin?"

Chapter End Notes

chilton: fuckers stole my immortality can't have shit in baltimore

as always you can find certifiedclown at willgrahampussypower and searchandrescue at seveneyesoup

a place at the table

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Beverly stood by Jack's desk waiting for him to look up from his work. He finished the page he was reading and set down the report.

"What is it you need?" Whatever he was expecting her to say, he clearly expected it to take a while, but he didn't seem to mind. She would take advantage of that.

She leaned on the desk, considering how to ask. "I just wanted to check in on Miriam. How is she?"

Jack didn't meet her gaze. "She's doing as well as she can be, given the circumstances. She's staying with her parents for the time being, and she's going to start therapy so she can get the help she needs to move on, as much as that's possible." He looked up at her. "That's not all you wanted to ask, is it?" It wasn't.

"Well, I was thinking," she began, considering her words. She wondered if she should phrase this delicately; Jack was known to be protective of Miriam Lass, understandably so. "If it's alright with you, I'd like to write to her. I know reminders of this place might be the last thing she wants, but it might help to have a positive association. Or to talk to someone who saw a lot of it firsthand." She hoped she wasn't being too forward. Miriam was essentially a stranger to her, and Jack had known her before---before *that* .

Jack looked absently at the people passing through the halls just outside his office, lost in thought. She was worried she had crossed a line she hadn't known existed when he came to, picking up a pen and setting it down again, like he was going to give an address and thought better of it.

"Tell you what. I'll let her parents know about your offer, and if she wants to talk, I'll put you two in touch. The decision should be up to her what she wants to remember or forget. If I were her, I think I would rather forget." He looked calm, but his eyes betrayed equal parts guilt and sympathy. Beverly understood why.

“Thank you, sir.” She set a piece of paper down on the table. “It’s only a first draft, but it gives you an idea of what I want to say. You knew her, so.” She gave a small shrug. “You can tell me if it’s way off. I just think she might need someone who doesn’t think of her as someone dead.” Jack looked at the folded letter. He was still looking at it as she left the office. If he was going to read it, Beverly thought he would want privacy. She hoped her letters could help Miriam. If not her and her letters, then someone, somewhere. She had gone so long without a friend.

If it weren’t for the police cars, Will wouldn’t have believed he was at an FBI crime scene. There were two sheriff’s department patrol cars, an almost certainly non-functioning Chevrolet surrounded by weeds which had clearly grown around it, and his own car, which his father was still sitting in. He was about to double check the address when he was greeted by Jack Crawford.

“Will! You made it.” He looked almost surprised. Will looked around. Beverley, Price, and Zeller were nowhere to be found. It was just them and the local police.

“Yeah, I did. Where is everybody? In fact, how did you get here?”

“Hitched a ride with local PD, they said this place was in the middle of nowhere, and they weren’t kidding. Everyone else is still trying to find it. They’re ready for you inside whenever you are.”

Will appreciated Jack keeping the crime scene untouched. What he didn’t appreciate was that he was the one doing so much of the work. *Faster answers, better results, get yourself a Will Graham today!* Will stared at the small house, which looked uninhabited. It was an old house, and it looked like it. *Call now and receive another profiler for free!* Two of him. That was a joke. Now that he thought about it, there was another Graham with him today. He walked back to the car and knocked on the passenger window. Beau, who was crocheting a scarf, rolled it down as little as humanly possible. Will didn't blame him; it was freezing out there.

“Daddy, could you turn off the car? I don’t want to run out of gas all the way out here.”

“Didn’t you fill up on the way? It’s freezin’ out.” Obligingly, his dad leaned over to look at the gauge, which showed over three quarters of a tank. “Y’got plenty.”

“No one’s making you leave the car, Daddy, just turn it off, you can always turn it back on.” Beau shot him a look, then turned off the car, mumbling something about old bones under his breath. Having used up his only excuse to delay the inevitable, Will sighed, turned back to the house, and prepared himself for whatever it was he was about to see.

It was dark inside the old house. As his eyes adjusted to the light, Will kept his mind deliberately focused on observing the crime scene, pushing away the encroaching presence of whoever was responsible for whatever it was he was looking at. Most of the house was a large room, a kitchen and a living room. The table was set, and there were dishes on the stove. There were a pair of easy chairs by the cold fireplace. It would almost have been domestic, if not for the corpses.

Standing at the kitchen table was a man’s corpse, flayed and preserved, without organs, a strange shadow of musculature held in its pose with armature wire. He was pulling out a chair to sit down to eat the meal before him - preserved organs, arranged like they would be in a body - but not his own. His organs were in the pots on the stove, set in them with nothing else, like a child’s play food or the subject matter of a bizarre still life, plastic and plain. *They weren't alone before. Someone changed the scene.* He grimaced, pushing the thought out of his mind, and looked in the oven. Limbs, belonging to a young man by the look of them, were unceremoniously piled inside. That was also a more recent change. Briefly, Hannibal crossed his mind. Will gritted his teeth, fighting a laugh that was not his, and proceeded to the final corpse.

This one was a woman. She was sitting in one of the easy chairs by the fireplace, a blanket in her lap and her hand resting over a bible. *In death as she was in life.* Unlike her husband, she had her organs, though they were piled somewhat clumsily inside her. *They weren’t there originally*, Will thought. *They were placed there. Whoever did this thought better of it*. Will rubbed his eyes and sat down in the other easy chair, which had been covered in plastic for him. If it didn’t betray the expectation it did, it would almost be considerate. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, relaxing into the chair as the familiar feeling overtook him. He opened his eyes.

I am upset. It wasn’t right, the way they treated me. Like I was somehow removed from the love I deserved, cheated out of it. If they won’t give it, I will take it. First, I kill my mother,

strangling her. She needs to die first, so she won't see the others die. Then I sneak out to kill my father. I break his neck. I cannot risk a fair fight. I drag him back into the house, laying him on the kitchen floor. And then I wait. He will come home, and he will see my good work. It will be the last thing he ever sees. He caused this to happen. He stole them from me. This is my design.

I prepare the bodies carefully, skinning them, drying them, coating them, preserving them. A family who can no longer ignore me. Their punishment is my reward. This is my design.

Will looked at the body occupying the chair opposite him. She had her organs. The few changes he'd observed felt strongly of regret and resentment. As the son turned the killer's mother against him, so had he turned the killer against his mother. He had attempted to restore her some of her dignity, and robbed the son of what little remained of his. It was almost forgiveness, returning her organs to their rightful place. As Will gathered his thoughts, he had the distinct sense that his mind looked like her abdomen, distinct pieces approximating the correct function they ought to have.

As he stood blinking in the sunlight, he saw Jack Crawford waiting for him, talking to Beverly Katz. They fell quiet when they saw Will, Beverly looking at him with sympathy, Jack with expectation.

"What did you see in there?" Jack asked.

Will rubbed his eyes. "Revenge. Revenge as reclamation of what the killer believes is his. He's taking back what he's owed."

"And what is it he believes he's owed?"

Will looked at him, full of bitterness. *I'm owed some bitterness,* he thought. "Family, Jack," he said, pronouncing every syllable carefully. "You're looking for a close family member, but not the child of these parents. Not biologically, anyway, maybe a nephew, or---or a cousin, older than the son by several years. Old enough to believe he stole them from him. He might have some of their body parts in his home, as keepsakes, to possess them even when he's away. He's not going to be happy about you taking them from him, Jack."

Jack looked at him, then nodded and walked away to talk to someone from the sheriff's office. Will scanned the crowd, wondering if Hannibal was there. He couldn't imagine him driving all the way out here, but he couldn't imagine him missing an opportunity to see him, either. Something was wrong about the crime scene. The glossy preservative over the body parts was covered in a layer of dust, and the electricity to the home was off. They had been abandoned, forsaken---

Beverly interrupted Will's thoughts. "What do you think of this crime scene? Smells like updog."

"What's updog?" he asked, trying to come back down to reality.

"Nothing much. Hey, are you okay? You don't look so great." Realizing his mistake, Will blinked a few times and shook his head. He considered offering her a smile, but knew it wouldn't serve its intended purpose. It would only make her more concerned.

"I'm fine. I can do my job." He put his hands in his pockets and looked out over the crime scene.

Beverly didn't look convinced. "No one was questioning that. But if you needed to take time off, no one would blame you. You were just under the control of Chesapeake Ripper because he framed you for murder, and then he was shot dead in front of you. It's a lot to go through. It's fine to need a break." Will nodded, hoping he would just look tired. It must be nice to believe that the Ripper was dead, that he was free of his influence. He saw Hannibal talking to Jack. *Speak of the devil.*

"Where is everyone?" He was usually the last person to arrive at a crime scene, not the first.

"Lost, probably. I got so turned around trying to get here. I think I wasted half an hour after a wrong turn. Nothing's marked and the roads are the same color as the dirt. It's impossible to find this place."

"Well, people say the same thing about my house. I still find my way home."

“You don’t live on a dirt road, do you?”

“Not anymore. Did for a bit growing up.” He looked at his car and saw Beau watching them. He motioned for him to come over.

“Explains how you got here, I guess.”

Will shrugged. Beau was walking over to them with the scarf he was making draped over his shoulder to keep it off the ground. He raised the working end of it, which was in his hands, to wave at them. Will waved back. “Hey, Daddy, which house was it that had the dirt road? Was it Georgia?”

Beau stood opposite of Beverly and Will and thought for a moment. “No. North Carolina, Georgia was gravel. Important distinction,” he said, looking at Beverly, who seemed amused by that idea.

“Worst roads I’ve ever lived on were pavement with potholes. Nothing like these though, they have to hold some kind of record. You could kill someone and cover them with dirt and you wouldn't even have to dig a grave.”

“Or,” Will said, putting his hands in his pockets, “you could kill your family and preserve them.”

“Or you could do that,” she said, looking at Beau, who was staring at Will and looking mildly shocked. Will nodded.

“The Camber family has been skinned and preserved with some sort of resin and---displayed in their home. Except the son. He’s, uh, he's in the oven.” Out of habit, Will flashed a bit of a pained look at Beau, who didn’t react except to pause his crochet.

“The oven? What’s he doin’ in there?”

“It’s to hide him, to remove him from the home. And to punish him.” Beau frowned a bit, considering. Will continued. “The punishment is for takin' what the killer believed was his, the affection from Mr. and Mrs. Camber.” Beau nodded, his question answered, and went back to his crochet. Will looked at Beverly. “Is there a reason we still need to be here? Jack has his answers from me.”

She looked at him apologetically. “Jack wants you to stay in case we find anything. The boys can’t be too far away, Z’s a good driver but a bad navigator, and vice versa for Price. They probably got lost and argued about switching drivers.”

“Speakin’ a' drivers,” Beau said, “I’m gonna head on back down to the car if that’s alright with y’all, my hands are nearabouts too numb to crochet.”

Beverly smiled at him. “It looks good. How long have you been crocheting?”

“Couple a' days now. Jus' started learnin’, needed a new hobby while I was up here. You want it?” He held up the scarf, offering it to her. “Think it’ll be a bit short, but should suit you jus' fine. Jus' gotta tie it off.” As he finished the row, she looked at Will, pleasant surprise and approval on her face. It was the first time he’d seen that look since high school. “Well, let me go get my scissors and I’ll be right back.”

As he walked away, Beverly turned to Will. “Your accent gets worse around him, you know that?”

Will looked back at her, confused. “I don’t have an accent.”

“You do when you’re talking to him. Can you not hear it?”

Will raised his eyebrows at her. “Clearly not.”

The corner of her mouth twitched into a smile. “Your vowels get more comfortable. You’re usually very harsh with your consonants, but with him it’s like you relax. It feels more natural.”

“Well, it is the way I learned how to speak,” Will said, careful to keep his voice casual. He didn’t want her to realize he’d deliberately taught himself to speak in a tone that would overcorrect to keep him from slipping back into his native southern drawl when he got upset. He wanted to change the subject, but struggled to think of anything to talk about that wasn’t the crime scene. He didn’t have to, though, as Beau returned with the scarf, weaving in the loose end before handing it to Beverly.

“Thanks. Really, I like it a lot,” she said, wrapping the navy blue scarf around her neck. The edges were a little wobby at one end, the uneven gauge of a new crocheter. She was about to say something else, which Will feared was about his accent, when they heard the crunching of tires on gravel. “Oh, finally,” Beverly said, taking off toward the car. Will looked at Beau, who shrugged, and they followed her.

As Price and Zeller got out of the car, Beverly crossed her arms. “You guys took your sweet time. You're late,” she said good-naturedly.

“Well,” Price began, looking at the mud covering the bottom half of the car and frowning, “he insisted on driving. I said I should, I’m better with directions, but---”

“I’m the better driver. The roads here are bad, I thought it would be better for your car,” Zeller said.

“It’s a corolla,” Jimmy said, looking at the car with more fondness than his comment implied. “Thank you,” he added quietly, and Zeller nodded in acknowledgement.

“Jack’s been waiting on you for the briefing,” Beverly said, nodding toward the cluster of squad cars.

When they convened on the porch, Beverly stood next to Will, which he was grateful for. He didn't want to be alone with Hannibal just yet. It didn't stop Hannibal from standing behind him, though. *What did you expect?* Will ignored him.

"That's a lovely scarf you're wearing, Ms. Katz." Will hadn't expected to be ignored in return. Maybe whatever Hannibal had to say to him was more personal. It still stung.

Beverly turned a little to face Hannibal. "Thanks. Will's dad made it for me." Beau glanced over at him and then at Will. "He's great, I think you've been replaced." She paused, but Hannibal didn't say anything. Will resisted the urge to look, imagining the polite confusion on his face. "Will's dad is my favorite old man now." Will held his breath to avoid laughing and looked at Beau, who was already looking at him. Will bit his lip, trying not to imagine Hannibal's face. He could still picture the expression he'd have, and had to breathe in deeply through his nose to keep from laughing.

"I see." Will could hear Hannibal putting his hands in his pockets. Jack finished talking to Zeller and Price, and stood in front of all of them for the briefing.

"This is the home of Andrew and Maryanne Camber. They and their son Charles are inside. They were found this morning by someone from their power company who was up here because they hadn't paid their bills in months. They called the sheriff who called us. They've been preserved, but not all of them, we think some of their remains might be with the killer. If not, we need to find them. Local PD has already taken photos, so you're free to move whatever you need. If there's anything you think you'll need to see, I'd rather get it done now so we don't have to come back out here. Any questions? No? Gloves and evidence bags are in the car by the side door, you know the drill."

With that, Beverly and the Wonder Duo left to go do their jobs with various reactions, mostly put-upon sighs and poorly hidden rolling eyes. Will watched them go with tired eyes and pulled his glasses off to hook them on his shirt, rubbing at his temples to stave off the incoming headache. He heard fabric shifting and knew without looking that Hannibal had moved to stand beside him.

"It's a rather unusual crime scene." It was directed at Will, but said to no one in particular.

Will looked over at him. "Would we be here if it wasn't?" he raised his eyebrows.

“Admittedly not. It seems equal parts dollhouse and museum. Playthings on display.”

“What the killer did to the Cambers is hardly child’s play, Dr. Lecter.”

“Wudn’t there some lady who made murder dollhouses where you solved the crime inside?”

“Yeah,” Will said, his train of thought interrupted. “The nutshell studies, they make you learn all about them when you start learning about forensics.”

“Life imitates art. A pity to see that art recreated. Perhaps art imitating life cannot help but to see itself made reality once again as the cycle begins anew.” Hannibal's eyes scanned the barren trees, pausing for a moment on a bird’s nest, exposed by the winter’s lack of foliage. “You would hardly expect such shocking violence out of a place so small and peaceful, but the darkness reaches for us all, even as we hide in our strongholds against it.”

“Thoreau and Katczinsky both lived in houses not dissimilar to this one, it has a lot less to do with the setting and a lot more to do with the person.” Will thought of his own house and wondered if he meant it as a comment or a threat. Maybe it didn’t matter.

“What about the person responsible for this?”

“This is a response to an imagined betrayal. And a punishment. Claiming his birthright and punishing the brother who took it from him.”

“Jacob and Esau, the younger brother laying claim to the birthright.”

“And one brother resorting to underhanded means to claim it.” The edge of his mouth twitched into something like a smile. “This isn’t scriptural, this is---personal. A cuckoo in the nest.”

“Not often that cuckoos kill the mama bird. They need her still,” Beau said, glancing at the partially open door to the house.

“This one did. He regretted it, though. He put her organs back inside of her, and left her in a comfortable seat, and chopped up his brother and put him in the oven. Why didn’t he bury him? The ground was warm enough, so why not? Remove him entirely.”

“Maybe he thought it was better’n he deserved. Bit nice to bury someone. Its respectful. Returnin' to the soil, back to where you came from. ”

“It is,” Will said, conscious of Beverly’s comment on his accent. “Sorry to drag you into all this, by the way. It’s not something you’re used to.” He hoped that would be enough for Hannibal to leave, since he was done dancing for him. However, the psychiatrist remained exactly where he was, looking between Will and Beau.

“Well, you’ve always been into morbid things, Will. This ain’t so bad, I’ve gotten used to it. Sorta hoped you’d leave it in middle school, but that’s alright.” Beau looked at Hannibal the way he looked at everyone when he talked about Will, an expectation of shared affection. Will wondered if affection was any part of what Hannibal felt for him, and for a moment he felt like he was back at the observatory.

Hannibal smiled and nodded. "It would be lovely to talk with you at length in a more comfortable setting. I'd love to have you and Will for dinner."

Beau’s smile dropped a shade as he peered at Hannibal with narrowed eyes. He looked to Will, who met his eyes with raised eyebrows and shrugged. "Well," Beau said, turning back to Hannibal, "I think that'd be jus' fine."

"Yeah," Will agreed, resisting the urge to hide his face in his hands. For some strange reason, he was embarrassed. "That'd be great."

Hannibal's smile widened - or at least, it looked like it did. It was hard to tell; his face didn't change. "Excellent," he said warmly. "Will you be free next Thursday?" He looked at Will

like he was challenging him. Will wondered if he would serve them the remains of Matthew Brown.

"Sure," Will said, looking at Hannibal meaningfully, "but we'll provide the meat. It's been too long since we've gone fishing."

Hannibal's smile seemed to widen. "I'd like that," he said approvingly and Will despised the strange warmth it inspired in his gut. "That would be lovely, Will."

It was disconcerting, Will decided, to be with him again, at crime scenes together, extending dinner invitations and conversing like old times, like he hadn't had someone killed, like Hannibal hadn't killed anyone, like he wasn't eating them. *Eating them,* Will thought. He had offered to provide the meat to keep his father out of things.

He didn't mind so much, he'd realized that as soon as he realized the truth, but it felt wrong to bring Beau into it. *Wrong because you don't want him corrupted, or wrong because you want to exclude him from it?* The question felt like one of his own thoughts, but it sounded like Hannibal's voice. That had been happening more and more recently. He realized with a feeling like wet sand churning in the bottom of his lungs that both were true. He wanted to eat Matthew's organs. They---belonged to him.

Beau cleared his throat. "Right," he said awkwardly. "I'm just---goin' to go sit in the car. 'Scuse me."

Will and Hannibal were left alone, and Will was left split down the middle, rotated clean in half with everything hidden on display. Whatever feelings he had---revulsion, anticipation, contempt, intrigue, comfort, disgust---they were all two sides of the same coin.

When Will entered the lab, he found three familiar corpses and two unfamiliar faces waiting for him. He was already on edge from his encounter with Hannibal and the realizations that came with it, but the new faces escalated the feeling from uncomfortable to something alarmingly close to unsettled. Beverly waved him over to the table supporting Charles

Camber, and as he walked across the room he could feel the eyes of the unfamiliar man and woman following him.

“Look at this,” she said, picking up the detached left arm. “On the other bodies, he cut the muscles off on one side to treat them and sewed them back into the tendons to reattach them, but on this one…” she pointed at the sutures for the deltoid, which had snapped, leaving stretched holes in the dried tendons that held them. “He was pulled apart.” She looked at him, a hint of a smile in the corner or her mouth. She was trying to put him at ease, but all he could focus on were the stares from behind the other table. His skin was crawling.

“The---” he turned to look at the strangers. They weren’t looking at him, but he had their full attention. “The thread. What is it?” He bit his tongue. People didn’t like when he moved like that, but it was instinctive. He could feel his heartrate rising, a steady thud-thud-thud starting in his ears.

“Regular cotton, heavy-duty thread, like you get at the craft store. This guy isn’t exactly a professional.”

Will rubbed his eyes, resisting the urge to hide behind his hands, and put on a pair of gloves. “The hyoid?”

“Broken. He was strangled.” Will nodded and held the edge of the table, trying not to touch his face with his gloved hands. He turned to face the wall. Beverly looked concerned. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll---I’ll be fine. Where are Price and Zeller?”

“They’re at dinner, they had a reservation.”

“On a Tuesday?”

“Closest they could get to Valentine’s Day.” Will stared at her. “Next reservation was three months from now.” His expression didn’t change. “I heard them asking Jack, they said they’d have replacements,” she explained. “That’s Daniel Timms and Edith Harper, they work in drug crimes. You want me to introduce you?”

Will didn’t, but it would be better to get it over with. He swallowed his reluctance and nodded. “Sure.”

“Dan, Edith, this is Will. Will, Edith and Dan. They’re covering for the boys tonight.”

Dan smiled at him. “It’s nice to meet you.” There was a *finally* hidden in his demeanor. Will wondered if he read Tattlecrime.

Edith set down her clipboard. “I didn’t know you’d be joining us. I didn’t realize behavioral specialists did lab work.”

“Will’s published, he wrote a paper on determining time of death by insect activity. He wrote *the* paper on determining time of death by insect activity.” Recognition dawned on their faces, and they went back to work, but Will saw Edith looking at him. There weren’t any insects on these bodies.

Will stood off to the side as he watched them work in silence, wishing for a distraction. It usually felt strange hearing lighthearted conversation while he walked to the edge of his mind and looked over into the strange space where other people whispered to him, begging to take his place. He found himself missing the chatter now. He would rather sit through hours of bad jokes or conversations about old music and daytime television than endure another minute of these people making him feel like an outsider when he was the one that belonged there. *Like an insect in a cage.*

“Hey, Bev,” he began, finding himself walking toward the table holding Maryanne Camber, "what are these bodies coated in?” He tapped the body’s forehead with his fingernail, the clacking sound it would have made dampened by the latex glove. He wanted to do it again, without that barrier, and wondered where that urge came from. If it came from him or the killer.

“Resin of some kind, but it’s been cut with something. Not sure what, we’ll have to test it.” She held up a flake of resin from the cracks where Charles’s body was pulled apart. It had a yellowish tint to it, and held pieces of the sutures on one end. Will looked back at the body in front of him and thought of how the organs looked in the pots in the house, placed in there, clean and self-contained, unchanging, like a child’s toy food.

“Isn’t that what the last guy used?” He’d never had a chance to see anything but the pictures Beverly had brought him.

“Among other things, yes. He was a little more experienced than this one. He’s an amateur,” she said, gesturing vaguely at the clumsy craftsmanship.

“Amateur comes from a word meaning lover,” Will said, considering the perverted care that went into every step of the product laid before him. “Loved you to death. So why did he leave you? The utilities were off, the bodies were covered in dust, the house was abandoned.” Will looked at the others, who had nothing to offer. They never did. “If he’d had a change of heart, he would have broken them, torn them apart like he did his brother.” Will could feel them watching, Beverly patiently, Edith and Dan with confusion and anticipation. He felt a pit in his stomach, but he wasn’t sure if it was from them or from what had just occurred to him.

“Unless you’ve found a new one.” Will's voice was full of contempt, it was all he could feel, closing in on him from all sides, his contempt for his situation, the contempt he felt toward him from Dan and Edith, who were staring at him, uncomfortable, and his contempt for the man whose only understanding of love was to take and to own. He exhaled, forcing every bit of air out of his lungs, as if that would somehow dispel it. He felt sick.

“You really are like this, huh?” Dan asked it like it was too good to be true. “I thought Freddie Lounds was exaggerating, but you really are this much of a fr---” he stopped when he saw Edith and Beverly staring at him in shock. Will felt a hot flash of shame on the back of his neck when he realized he was the only one who had been expecting it. *It’s just rare to hear people say it aloud.*

“I am---so sorry,” Edith said, as if she could somehow save the situation. “He shouldn’t have said that.” *But you were both thinking it* , Will thought. At least she had the decency to apologize. “Though I’m not going to lie,” she continued, “you are making me a little uncomfortable. Could you, like... not be a creep in my lab, please?”

Will didn't know how to respond to that. An endorsement of an opinion in an apology for expressing it. "It's not---" he struggled to get the words out, his face hot and flushed. He blinked and was horrified to find liquid building up there. He bit the inside of his cheek, hard, before continuing, "It's not your lab."

"Damn right it's not your lab." Beverly was glaring daggers at both of them. "If anything, it's Will's lab, since he works here and you two are guests. But if that's not good enough for you, then it's my lab. Will is a member of our team and he's my friend, and you'll have to accept one of those. If I hear another word about him from either of you, I'm reporting you to Jack and I'm going to get you both fucking *fired*. You understand?" Her voice rang clear throughout the room. They nodded. "Now finish up the report and get out of here." They nodded again, and went back to work without so much as a glance at Will.

Will tried to thank her, but he couldn't get his voice to work. Instead, he walked over to her and leaned on her shoulder. She leaned her head on his, and he knew she understood what he couldn't say.

Will woke up to a phone call at 9:25 A.M. He usually woke up far earlier to let the dogs out. He rubbed his eyes and picked up the phone.

"Jack?"

"You know how you said he abandoned them?" Will mumbled a response, trying not to sound like he'd just woken up. *"Well, it wasn't by choice. There was an adopted son, Elijah Cambers, and he drove his truck off the side of the mountain back in October."*

"On purpose?"

"Doesn't look like it. His coworker was listed as his next of kin, and his biological parents had power of attorney. They sent money for the funeral and to pack his belongings. The boxes

are still in the house, they had plans to buy a storage unit once it sold. Get down here as soon as you can, I'll send you the address."

Will took a sip of the coffee Beau left by his bed. It was lukewarm by now. "See you there." He hung up the phone. There was a note by the coffee, scribbled on the back of an old receipt. *"Let the dogs out for you, figured you needed your rest. Gone grocery shopping. Love you. - Daddy".* Will smiled as he finished his coffee and watched the dogs lie in the patch of late morning sun streaming through the windows. Jack could wait a little longer.

By the time Will arrived at the scene, it was close to noon. It promised to be fairly straightforward, taking the boxes back to Quantico to look through and searching for remains buried on the property. He lifted the crime scene tape and walked under it, flashing his ID at the police officer nearby. He let himself into the house, and found Jack standing in the living room. The house was furnished, and cardboard boxes lined the walls, taped shut.

"What took you so long?"

"Only one car. I didn't realize my presence was required to, uh, move boxes," he waved at the wall.

"I'd have driven you if you'd asked. And you're not here to move boxes, you're here in case they find human remains on the property. I want you to be here for that, when and if they do." Not wanting to test Jack's patience, Will sat down at the table, setting his sunglasses down, then thought better of it and joined the group moving boxes outside. The repetition was nice, and allowed him to almost forget where he was until he saw that all-too-familiar glint of sunlight on red hair. He set down his box as quickly as he could to go back in, but it was too late. She knew he was there and she had intercepted him before he could make his tactical retreat.

"Manual labor! Is that what you've been reduced to?" Before he could respond, she took a picture, the flash blinding him momentarily. "I talked to dear old dad."

Will rubbed his eyes, trying to recover his vision and to stay calm. He hadn't warned Beau about talking to her. "Hello, Freddie," he said, making no attempt to mask his hostility toward her.

She tilted her head in her usual imitation of friendliness. “Don’t you want to know what he told me?” Will took a deep breath.

“I could always read it on your site. Or, if I wanted to know what he *actually* said, I could always ask him.” Whatever she knew, it wasn’t going to change her opinion of him. It was as set in stone as his opinion of her, and full of just as much dislike.

“Funny thing, that,” she said, licking her lower lip. “He didn’t actually say anything. Just told me he wasn’t talking to any journalists. And to piss off. I wonder who got to him before me that was so bad. Probably the *Sun.* They’re so abrasive, it’s a miracle they ever land repeat interviews.”

“Unlike you,” Will said through his teeth, “who is the peak of natural charm.” He crossed his arms, trying to stay where he was instead of leaving or getting in her face.

“I try. It helps, in this line of work.” Freddie smiled at him with a practiced sweetness. “I have to thank you, covering your story got me more traffic than I’ve had in years. Frederick Chilton, the Chesapeake Ripper! Who knew? And to think I kept him alive while he was facing the consequences of a failed framing? It's compelling stuff.”

Will laughed sarcastically. “The Ripper has quite a history of framing, doesn’t he?”

Her face fell in an imitation of sympathy. “I’m sorry, is that a bit personal for you? I suppose the wound is rather fresh.”

Will bit his tongue, looking for any response he wouldn’t regret. “Like you aren’t here to add insult to injury and suck whatever blood you can out of the wound. I’ll tell you something else you can suck---”

“Mr. Graham, I have made a living adding insult to injury," her voice was infuriatingly steady. “I don’t intend to stop now.”

He felt a strong hand on his shoulder. “As a doctor, Ms. Lounds, I must advise that you leave this injury the space to heal. Wounded animals have been known to lash out.”

Freddie Lounds’s face drained of color. “Understood," she said quickly, looking past them into the house. “I’m not here for you, Will. Not today. See you ‘round.” Her finger was on the camera trigger, but, after looking at Hannibal, she walked away.

Will wasn’t sure if the warmth in his chest was satisfaction from seeing her afraid or if he was genuinely comforted by Hannibal’s support. The feeling twisted when he saw the other man's face and watched the expression on it turn from one of disdain to concern, and he found himself wanting again to believe in the promise of comfort Hannibal had once offered him, like a string pulling him deep into the earth.

“Are you alright, Will? Did she confront you?” the concern in Hannibal’s voice matched his expression, and Will searched for a distraction to keep from accepting the invitation. His hands were trembling, and he took the only escape he knew, stepping into the mind of the killer whose house he stood in front of.

“What do you see, Will?” Will wasn’t sure if Hannibal had asked him that or if it was only in his mind. He saw Elijah Camber, carefully carrying a roll of skin, tanning his family’s hides. He did it with care and skill not seen in the crude caricatures in the house on the mountain, cutting and stretching and leaving them to dry. Like the bodies, it was to keep them. They would be stored somewhere in the house, somewhere cool and dry and dark.

“They’re in the walls.” Hannibal blinked at him.

“What?”

“The skins. They’re in the walls.” Will was surprised at how calm he felt. Usually insights left him on edge, but he felt more calm than he did before. He stepped past Hannibal to tell Jack. “What’s on the other side of that wall?” he asked, pointing to the one past the dining room table.

“The bedroom. Why?” Jack asked.

“Their skins are in that wall. That one or the one next to it, an interior wall, away from the changes in temperature. They were preserved to keep them, to---to honor them. He’d want to keep them safe and near him.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.” Jack nodded to Beverly, Price, and Zeller, and then went outside for reinforcements. Will went back outside to avoid the sounds of removing drywall, and, about fifteen minutes later, saw cops leaving with strips of soft brown leather in evidence bags, along with a jar of eyeballs which looked pickled rather than preserved. Last out of the door was Beverly, who was carrying his sunglasses.

“These yours?” She offered them to him.

“Yeah, thanks," he took them and wiped the lenses clean on his shirt.

“They look like soccer mom glasses.” She was smiling at him.

“Well, yeah,” he admitted, rubbing the arm of the glasses with his thumb. “They wrap around and block more sun. And---everything else, when I need to,” he paused, trying to think of better words, "to see less things.”

It was a poor way to explain what he meant, but Beverly nodded. “I get that. Listen, we’re going to lunch, you wanna come with? I’ll text you the address.”

“I’d---like that.” Will put on his sunglasses and took Beverly’s extended hand to stand up. “See you there.”

“See you," she started walking toward her car. “Oh!”

Will turned around. “Yeah?”

“I told Jack about what happened. In the lab. He said he probably owes you, for that and… the other thing, so if you ever think of anything.” She shrugged a little.

Will felt a smile creep onto his face. “I’m sure I’ll think of something.”

“You know, when I said I was willing to make it up to you, this isn’t what I had in mind,” Jack said, setting his fishing pole into the holster on his seat.

“Are you not enjoying yourself?” Will asked, trying not to laugh at Jack, who looked rather miserable.

“I mean, I get it. The great outdoors. I see the appeal---in *summer*.” Will did laugh a little at that, and Beau joined in. “Wait a minute,” Jack protested, “aren’t you colder than I am? Every time I see you you’re saying how cold it is, and now that we’re out in it you’re fine?”

“Wudn't fishin' then,” Beau said, tucking his blanket under him against the wind. Will nodded in agreement.

“Does that make a difference?” He looked between Will and Beau.

“Sure does. Ain’t no reason for me to freeze to death buyin' groceries, but I chose to be out here. This kind a' fishin' depends on the cold, so I knew what I's settin' out to do.”

Jack opened his mouth, then closed it. “What’s different about this fishing?”

“Fish’re a lot less hungry in the wintertime. You’ve gotta get ‘em to bite regardless, entice 'em with somethin' they can’t refuse.”

“You see how that’s another argument for summer, right?” Jack shook his head.

“I like a challenge. It’s the same sorta thing you do, figure out what makes ‘em tick and use it to get ‘em. Difference is that you do for public safety an’this you do for personal gain. Granted, some fishin' is for the public good. Invasives an’ all that. I’d say that’s closer t’what you do, but I never much liked implyin’ that there’s anything completely different about people. They’re all jus' people, and some of ‘em do bad things.” He stared into the hole in the ice, lost in thought.

Jack followed his gaze, and then looked at Will. Will knew he was wondering if that opinion had been influenced by the way people had treated him. He took a sip of the coffee Beau had brought for them and Jack did the same, and sighed.

“I don’t know the last time I had a good cup of coffee,” he said, holding the insulated mug as if it would warm his hands. “I quit buying the nice coffee about a year and a half ago when Bella decided to quit coffee for tea, and the coffee they make in the office is just terrible.” He made a face and set the mug down.

“Happy to provide it. I don’t know the last time Will’s had a decent cup of coffee, the stuff he buys is jus' nasty.” He looked at Will and shook his head affectionately.

“It all tastes the same to me, I’m not going to buy the expensive stuff.” Will wondered what complexities he had missed in the coffee Hannibal made him. It was rare that he missed complexities obvious to others. Hannibal was full of them, and no one else seemed to notice. He put the thought out of his mind. “Have you been fishing before, Jack?”

“Not since I was a boy. I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve been. It’s a long time to sit without saying anything.”

“You know that’s a lie, right? It’s something fishermen say to each other so they don’t have to listen to hours of conversation with people they don’t like. No one wants to hear the same

fishing fables they've heard told with more gusto and a smaller near-catch." Will plucked at the string on his fishing rod.

"Well, I'm sure all your fishing stories are true," Jack said, sounding willing to humor them.

"Most of them---"

"Will caught a shark once," Beau said, looking Jack dead in the face.

"That is one of the most," Will said, nodding. "I had help, something like that's too big to bring in alone. Such a monumental task requires outside support. It was on my line, though."

"You're really not going to start with one that's a little believable?" A smile was clear in his eyes and his voice, but not his mouth.

"Now, remember what happened last time you didn't believe my boy," Beau said, mock-serious. "Let 'im finish."

Will continued as casually as the cold would allow. "Not much more to it, really. We took turns reeling it in, and, after hours, we landed it. Five and a half feet of shark, taller than I was back then. My arms were sore for a week and the blisters from the rod lasted longer than that."

"Course, we had t'release it. It's not legal to keep those, and I doubt anyone's ever caught that shark again. Once a fish gets caught it's harder t'catch a second time."

Jack looked from Will to Beau and raised his eyebrows, a smile creeping onto his face.

"You still have that photo, Daddy?" Will asked.

“Course I do. It’s on my piano back in Florida, so I can’t very well produce the evidence.” Beau shrugged slightly. Will nodded and looked at Jack. No such photo existed, but if it did, it would be on the piano along with other photos of favorite memories---his parents’ honeymoon, his first fish, a picture of him asleep lying next to Churchill, their only family vacation, and a picture of him in boy’s clothes and his first haircut after he came out. There were more formal pictures on the walls---graduations, his parents’ wedding, and Christmas pictures, but the piano would be where it would have gone.

“Even if it wasn’t true, which it is,” Will said, “it’s not the point of a fishing story to convince the listener. The goal is to entertain and to encourage others to have something more entertaining, a challenge of one-upmanship. Bait the fish with a hook and your partners with a story. There is a reason the opening of the story is called a hook.”

Before anyone could respond, Will felt something on the end of his line. He jerked the rod upward to pierce the mouth of the fish and began reeling in. There was very little struggle, and moments later he was unhooking a medium sized trout from his fishing line. He placed it in the cooler and closed it, offering Beau a smile as he did. He put more bait on the line and cast it back into the deep hole in the ice.

Will woke up as he felt the car take the now-familiar turn onto Hannibal’s street. He wasn’t sure when he dozed off, but the red mark the seatbelt left on his arm suggested it had been a while.

“You wanna let 'im know we’re here? I’ll get the fish,” Beau said as they pulled into his driveway.

Will nodded, rubbing the mark on his arm. In passing, he wondered if it would be better for him to present the meat, as an offering. The vague wording of the thought took the sound of Hannibal’s voice, though it was not distinct enough to make out any words. Will focused on the smell of the early evening air instead, ignoring the sense that Hannibal often did the same. He knocked on the door, knowing Hannibal already knew they were here. *What other social motions do you go through, knowing both parties know they are unnecessary?* Again, Hannibal’s voice. Will’s tongue felt heavy in his mouth, and, ignoring the doorbell, swung the knocker on the front door twice. He heard motion from somewhere in the house, or he imagined he did, and he waited by the door.

Will had been about to knock again when Hannibal opened the door. “Welcome,” he said, smiling at them. “I’ve made almost everything already; it should just be a few minutes to cook the meat. Thank you for bringing it.” He took the cooler with the fish from Beau and ushered them inside.

“You can wait in the dining room. The food will be ready shortly,” he said to Will, standing still for a moment and watching as Will led the way. Will took his usual place to the left of Hannibal’s seat at the head of the table while Beau made a round of the room, taking it in.

“Some place he’s got,” Beau said, sitting down across from Will.

“Is that an insult or a compliment?” Will asked. He still wasn’t sure what he thought of the place. *The bright blue walls are a bit much*, he thought.

“Jus’ a statement. Herb garden is nice. I miss havin' a garden.”

The sound of the kitchen door interrupted their quiet conversation, and Hannibal emerged carrying a large dish, containing several trout whose tails had been pulled through their mouths. He placed the fish between Will and Beau.

“Truite saumonée au bleau with vegetables and broth, served with hollandaise sauce on the side,” he said, pouring the wine. He looked at Will, then at Beau. “Beautiful fish.”

“It was my turn to provide the meat,” Will said. “And it had been a while since we’d gone fishing together,” he added, hoping the aside would be sufficient to explain his objection to the usual meat. Hannibal gave no indication one way or the other.

“They’re more flavorful and firm than farmed specimens,” Hannibal continued, serving the fish. “I find the trout to be a very Nietzschian fish. Trials of his wild existence find their way into the flavor of the flesh.”

“Do what?” Beau asked. Will stared at him from across the table. To his credit, it was the most respectfully he had ever heard that phrase be used.

Hannibal looked at Beau like he didn’t know whether to be insulted, and repeated himself. “I said I find the trout to be---” he stopped when Beau waved his hand at him, lips parted mid-speech.

“I heard you the first time. I was jus' wonderin’ what the hell you meant.”

Hannibal closed his mouth and picked up his glass of wine, swirling it gently before taking a sip. Will guessed he was weighing whether the insult was worth more than the possibility to play cultured. The look in his eyes, when he opened them, said that the latter had won out. “Nietzsche believed in two kinds of morality, master and slave. Master morality was defined by---” he stopped again, seeing Beau’s face, which looked utterly unimpressed.

Beau set down his fork. “I have *read* Nietzsche,” he said slowly, his southern drawl very pronounced. “Not all of 'im, but enough. I jus' don’t know what that’s got to do with a fish.” He picked his fork back up and began to cut the flesh off the fish on his plate, glancing up at Hannibal, who retained his composure.

“The wild trout experiences trials of the will that farmed trout do not. The hardships of survival manifest a superior product, as each fish must rely on their instincts to hunt and to eat. To act on that instinct is to be a trout, there is no action separate from the being that enacts it.”

Beau put a bite of fish in his mouth and chewed, considering. “Well that’s fair’nough, I suppose. Answers the question I always did have about him, which is why we need to justify the existence of a species through any means. Justify t’who? Since God is dead and all," he paused, preparing another bite on his fork. “But then if we’re God to the fish, we’ve farmed them, and we made the ones that are lower quality.” He put the bite in his mouth, and Will picked at his own food, amused but unable to offer anything to the conversation.

“Are not followers of religion prey to the slave morality? If we are God to the trout, then the farmed fish are our devotees, and we prefer the ones that are not. What might that say about us?”

Beau tapped the end of his fork with his thumb, thinking. “Well, not a lot, considerin’ we aren’t. We control their lives, sure, but we didn’t create them. And anyway, their existence isn’t justified by their usefulness, or else conservation wouldn’t be what it is for things we can eat and things we can’t. They’re jus' fish, they don’t have a concept of justification. Or even of the fact that they’re a fish. All they know is to hunt and eat, like you said. Instinct.”

“What instincts drive you?” The question was direct, almost rude---a revenge for Beau’s earlier slight.

“Well, Nietzsche believed all life was driven by a need for power. Which you can use that to explain a lot of things, like the need to show off wealth, or quote people to make a show of how well-read and educated you are,” he said casually, in the same thoughtful tone as his other comments.

Finally, Will was able to contribute. “Wasn’t it Oscar Wilde who said quotation is the greatest substitute for wit?” He sipped his wine, inclining his head toward Beau ever so slightly as he did.

Hannibal’s face was drawn almost in a scowl, though he quickly hid it. “I did not quote. Only made reference to.” He ate a bite of food as if to wash the taste of disgrace out of his mouth. “Do you read a lot of philosophy?”

“Well, not really, just read *Beyond Good and Evil* to see what all the fuss was about. I figured I could get the best read on his ideas with his final work, and if there was somethin’ I needed to know from th’other ones there’d be footnotes. I’ve been meanin’ to read Kant, but I haven’t found the time.”

Hannibal nodded. “Kant sought justification of morality based in reason rather than religion. Is some part of that appealing to you?”

“Well, thing is,” Beau said, pausing for a sip of wine, “I’m not readin’ philosophy lookin’ for new sets of morals. I just wanna know if all the things people say about them are actually in line with their ideas or if everyone’s just cherrypickin’ what they like and filling in the rest.”

“Nietzsche believed all philosophy was great minds using the will to power to persuade others to their worldview, but you seem to have built your own. The hallmark of a strong mind.”

“His mark of a strong mind was to question your worldview, not to build one,” Beau said, tone bordering on correctory.

“In that case,” Will said, shifting in his seat, “I have the strongest mind between the three of us. I’ve had to question a lot. Suffering may build character, but it’s only virtue in melodrama.” In his mind, Hannibal’s voice asked him if he believed he had any virtue left after all that had happened. The real Hannibal offered a sympathetic look and nothing more.

Will drove them home after dinner, and the beginning of the drive passed in silence, with the radio faintly playing the only country station around. When it began to crackle and fade, Beau turned it off and turned to Will.

“Son?”

“Yeah, Daddy?”

“That man is *gay*.”

“What?” admittedly, Will had sort of hoped as much, but he wasn’t ready to admit that. Not to his father and not to himself. “He’s just European. And I already told you, I'm not talking boys with you."

“Now I’ve been to Europe,” Beau said, “and I’ve been on dates with men. He’s sweet on you.”

Will took his eyes off the road for a moment to look at his father in shock. “You *what* now?”

“Yeah? Mine and your mother’s honeymoon was in Europe, went out to the countryside in France. I’m sorry we never travelled much, I always meant to take ya but with movin' and down payments an’such---”

“No, no, no, I know that. I’ve seen pictures of that, I meant the second part, what do you mean you’ve been on dates with men?” His voice cracked a little as he said it, but he didn’t care.

“Oh, that. Did’ya really think I watched all those old westerns for the plot?” Beau said, a laugh in his voice.

Will didn’t know how to respond. “I just thought you had bad taste,” he said, shaking his head.

“You’re one to insult my taste in men, boy. You and your stuffy little rich man and his ugly suits.”

“Yeah, rich,” Will said, raising his eyebrows at him. Hannibal was far from his man, but protesting that would be pointless.

Beau threw his hands up in mock exasperation. “My own son, a gold digger! Where did I go wrong?”

“Well,” Will grinned, “probably the number of times you watched that gold rush movie. That guy wears a shirt, what, twice in the whole damn thing?”

Beau laughed. “Somethin’ like that.”

Another few minutes passed in silence as Will turned that information over in his mind.

“Tell me about it. Dating men.”

“Well,” Beau began, “I didn’t do it too much. Had a bit of a fling with a football player in high school, but he broke things off. Mostly there was jus' Antonio. We met in college, he was at Auburn studyin' mechanical engineerin', and we were together for the better part of a year. He was wonderful, he took care of me and even took me to meet his family. They let us sleep in the same bed when I was stayin' over on account of they didn’t know we was an item. I’d’ve liked to stay with him, but we lost touch when your grandpa broke his hip, and I had to move back and help with the farm. Not long after, I met your mother, and you know the rest from there.”

Will hesitated to ask his next question. “Were you ever… scared?”

“Well sure I was. Tell the truth, part’a me was relieved when I fell for your mother, no one would object t’me fallin’ in love with a woman. She made me happy, and I made her happy. It’s not the same, but nothing ever is. There’s a lot of ways to be happy, Will, and it’s not very often that one is wrong or right. I didn’t marry your mother for security, I don’t want ya to be thinkin’ I did. We loved each other, and I love you. It’s been an honor bein’ your dad.” He paused for a moment, looking at Will with fondness. “But I still think about 'im sometimes, and wonder if he’s doin' well. I did love 'im. Sometimes think I still do. I don’t regret what happened, but that don't mean I don’t sometimes wonder what could've been different.”

Will stared out at the road as he felt the warm feeling in his chest mingle, twist, and tangle with the bitter regret in his stomach. What could have been different for him? If he had made different choices, where would he be now? How much of what happened was his fault? Despite the car being only slightly warm, Will felt hot and uncomfortable. He stayed quiet, knowing he would be assumed to be thinking about his family. Was Abigail family? Will had wanted her to be. He snapped to attention when he started drifting almost into the other lane, and the feelings dissipated like dust blown off a surface, leaving a few motes remaining, stuck.

“Listen, Will, I don’t mean to be rude, but I’m starvin'. Can we stop for food?”

That comment broke the spell and brought Will back to himself. He smiled, and hoped it looked natural. It didn't feel natural. "Yeah, no, it's not enough food for a meal, Jack and I used to get McDonald's after all the time. We'll take the next exit and fill up while we're there."

"All that work to cook and it's not even enough to fill you up. Pity. You don't even have leftovers."

"Well, that one is because he's European. Making an excess of food is a part of American hospitality culture. And I think he eats some of the food while he's making it, so he's not hungry by the time it's made."

Beau pursed his lips. "Ruinin' his own dinner and everyone else's. For shame."

As they talked and laughed over their second dinner, Will felt relaxed and comfortable for the first time in recent memory. It felt like the right ending to the night, and reminded him of the long trips to new places. He never liked moving, but the trips were nice. That feeling of contentment carried him through the night, and he laid awake in bed, wrapped in that feeling, as warm and real as his blankets.

As he fell asleep, he thought about what Beau had said. *He's sweet on you*. He hadn't given it thought at the time, but it left an impression that he was exploring now in his mind, like a tongue over a missing tooth. Sweet on him. It had never occurred to him that Hannibal could be sweet, that he knew any love except a possessive controlling ownership, that he saw Will as a person worth knowing instead of a prize show dog to housebreak and train---that he loved Will as a man and was a man to love him as such---it almost seemed too good to be true. He allowed himself to believe it was possible. Just for the night.

Chapter End Notes

as always you can find certifiedclown at willgrahampussypower and searchandrescue at seveneyesoup

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